Shoshenq I was (and then wasn't) Shishak

by Dan Bruce

The most significant cross-references between the pharaohs of Egypt and the Hebrew kings are the biblical references that indicate Shishak, king of Egypt, and Rehoboam, king of the southern kingdom of Judah, were concurrent in history. The Bible recounts in 1 Kings 14:25 and 2 Chronicles 12:2 that Shishak invaded Judah, went to Jerusalem, took the Temple treasures and looted the king’s palace, then apparently returned to Egypt, all of those events happening in the fifth year of Rehoboam.

Jean-François Champollion identified the person called Shishak in the Bible as the pharaoh known to history as Shoshenq I, that identification being based on his interpretation of reliefs he viewed on a wall at Karnak in 1828. Interestingly, the Karnak inscriptions interpreted by Champollion do not mention Rehoboam and barely mention cities in Judah, and the city of Jerusalem is not mentioned at all, but the inscriptions do recount in detail the conquest of dozens of cities in the northern kingdom of Israel. Thus, the biblical account of the exploits of Shishak, which focus exclusively on conquests in Judah, and the Karnak accounts of the triumphs of Shoshenq I, which focus mainly on conquests in the northern kingdom of Israel, simply do not seem to be in agreement. That inconsistency raises the question: Is Shoshenq I really Shishak, as Champollion said, or is there a better explanation of his identity?

It is worthwhile to review what we know for certain about Shishak and Shoshenq I before tackling the identity question. Shishak, according to the Bible, gave refuge to the rebel Jeroboam during the last years of Solomon’s reign. He moved against Jerusalem in the fifth year of Rehoboam, taking the treasures of the Temple and the palace. All of that information is found in 1 Kings, chapters 11-14, and 2 Chronicles, chapter 12. From the tidbits of data given in those chapters, it is obvious that Shishak and Jeroboam had a close relationship over a long period of time. The Septuagint, for instance, records that Shishak gave his wife’s sister, Ano, to Jeroboam in marriage (3 Kings 12:24; LXX).

Shoshenq I is not mentioned in the Bible by that name. Everything we know about him comes from secular sources. Of primary interest for our purpose are the reliefs at Karnak, which tell us about Shoshenq’s military foray into the land of Canaan. Egyptologists have dated that campaign to 925 BCE, based on identifying the years 945-924 BCE for the reign of Shoshenq I, and that date aligns with the fifth year of Rehoboam in the chronology of the kings as calculated using Sir Henry

1 Some scholars speculate that mention of the cities of Judah and Jerusalem was originally included at Karnak but is now missing due to deterioration of the inscriptions.
Rawlinson’s year for the Bûr-Saggilê eclipse as an anchor date. But, as previously stated, the inscriptions at Karnak reveal that Shoshenq’s army fought battles predominantly in the northern kingdom of Israel and along the territory bordering Syria, with dozens of northern cities mentioned in the list of conquered locations. Only a few of the fortified cities in Judah\(^2\) are mentioned, the ones that would be encountered if skirting Judah to go into Israel, and no information is given about any sacking and looting of Solomon’s Temple and the king’s palace in Jerusalem.

Geopolitically speaking, Shishak’s Egypt and Jeroboam’s kingdom of Israel should have been close allies, with Egypt depending on Jeroboam and his kingdom to serve as a buffer state between Egypt and Syria. On the other hand, the Judah of Rehoboam would probably have been estranged from Egypt because Shishak had so recently given aid and comfort to Rehoboam’s archenemy, Jeroboam I, prior to the division of the kingdom of United Israel into separate northern and southern kingdoms. Thus, if Shishak was the same person as Shoshenq I, a campaign by Shoshenq to conquer cities in the northern kingdom of Israel as detailed at Karnak, instead of a campaign against the southern kingdom of Judah as detailed in the Bible, simply does not make any geopolitical sense.

In the harmonized chronology of the Hebrew kings that is presented in my book, *Sacred Chronology of the Hebrew Kings*, the invasion of Judah and looting of Jerusalem in the fifth year of Rehoboam is calculated to have occurred in the year 961 BCE, which does not align with the accepted 925 BCE date for the military campaign by Shoshenq I into Canaan as described at Karnak. So, the new chronology for the kings offered in my book means that Shishak’s invasion of Judah and pharaoh Shoshenq’s later campaign in Israel were two separate events.

According to the adjusted chronology for the Hebrew kings (no adjustment of Egyptian chronology is required), Shishak, before he became the pharaoh known as Shoshenq I, invaded Judah and came against Jerusalem in 961 BCE during the reign of Rehoboam. Thirty-six years later in 925 BCE, during the reign of Asa of Judah, he again invaded Judah and Israel, this time as the pharaoh Shoshenq I, king of Egypt. That scenario aligns with what is known about the history of the pharaohs during that period, which includes the last few years of Dynasty 21 and the early years of Dynasty 22.

Looking at the events of Egyptian history on either side of 925 BCE, only two invasions in the direction of or into the land of Canaan are documented on Egyptian monuments, the one undertaken by Shoshenq I that is recorded at Karnak, dated to 925 BCE, and a previous campaign into the Levant during the reign of pharaoh Siamun. That earlier event, which is recorded on a wall at Tanis,\(^3\) would have

\(^2\) See list of Rehoboam’s fortified cities in 2 Chronicles 11:5-10.

occurred in 961 BCE, thirty-six years before Shoshenq’s 925 BCE invasion according to my book’s chronology for the Hebrew kingdoms. The accepted regnal years for Siamun are 978-959 BCE, which makes that scenario possible. It is also probable that Shoshenq, then only a commander in the Egyptian army (and not yet a pharaoh), led Siamun’s campaign against Jerusalem. The biblical references to Shishak as “king of Egypt” would thus be understood as anachronisms.

Can the Karnak invasion by Shoshenq I be aligned with the reign of Asa of Judah? Yes, it can be, through a person the Bible calls Zerah the Ethiopian, who attacked Asa and Judah as recounted in 2 Chronicles 14: 9-12 as follows:

“And there came out against them Zerah the Ethiopian with an host of a thousand thousand, and three hundred chariots; and came unto Mareshah. Then Asa went out against him, and they set the battle in array in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah. And Asa cried unto the Lord his God, and said, Lord, [it is] nothing with thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us, O Lord our God; for we rest on thee, and in thy name we go against this multitude. O Lord, thou [art] our God; let not man prevail against thee. So the Lord smote the Ethiopians before Asa, and before Judah; and the Ethiopians fled” (KJV).

The Bible explains in 2 Chronicles 16:1 that, after Zerah and his invading army were defeated, Asa and the people of Judah had a victory feast in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Baasha, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, fortified Ramah and cut off all road access to Jerusalem from the north (that action by Baasha may have actually been concurrent with Zerah’s attack). That meant that Jerusalem was hemmed in on all sides, since the Egyptians were encamped on Judah’s southern border. The reference to Baasha’s fortification of Ramah happening in the thirty-sixth year 4 identifies Zerah’s invasion as occurring late in the year 926 BCE or possibly in early 925 BCE. When Asa appealed to Damascus for help, Benhadad I attacked Baasha from the north. That is when Baasha’s ally in Egypt, the pharaoh Shoshenq I, marshaled his troops and invaded Israel to defend him.

A close look at the evidence from the Bible and from Karnak indicates that the events of 926/925 BCE probably took place in four stages, as follows:

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4 Baasha died in Asa’s twenty-fifth year, so he could not have moved against Judah in Asa’s thirty-sixth regnal year. The phrase “thirty-sixth year” refers to the thirty-sixth year after the division of the kingdoms; see the regnal chronology displayed on pages 22-23 of Sacred Chronology.
Stage 1: Zerah the Ethiopian launched his invasion of Judah by attacking Hebron from the south, overcoming the defenders at that important fortified city. Zerah then attacked the fortified city of Mareshah, or possibly Hebron was not attacked and the fortified city of Mareshah was the point of first attack. In either case, Zerah and his task force were badly defeated by Asa and his Judean army at Mareshah, then were chased south as far as Gerar near Gaza. In the battle, Asa and his Judean forces took much spoil from Zerah and afterwards celebrated their victory in Jerusalem with a feast of thanksgiving, taking an oath to be loyal to God (2 Chronicles 14:9-15).

Stage 2: Baasha, king of the northern kingdom of Israel and ally of Egypt, had previously negotiated a non-aggression pact with Benhadad I of Damascus. He was thus free to move against Judah, and did so by fortifying the border town of Ramah to cut off access to Jerusalem from the north, possibly doing so simultaneously as Zerah was attacking Judah from the south.

Stage 3: Asa, fearing invasion by Baasha of Israel, sent gold and other treasures to Damascus, asking Benhadad I to renounce his non-aggression pact with Baasha and attack Israel on its northern border with Syria. Benhadad agreed and sent troops south to fight Baasha, in that way relieving the military threat to Judah as Baasha withdrew his troops from Ramah to defend his northernmost territories.

Stage 4: Baasha, now under attack from Damascus in the north, sent to Egypt for help from Shoshenq I, who was still aggrieved at the earlier defeat of his army under Zerah (from Karnak: “Now, My [Maj]esty found that ... [they] were killing ... [my soldiers?, and] my army leaders. His majesty was troubled about them”). Not wanting to have Syria overrun the northern kingdom and control all of Canaan, Shoshenq mustered his army and moved to confront Benhadad in northern Israel, skirting the cities of Judah (except Ajalon) before moving northward into Israel to begin his main campaign to protect the northern kingdom. Shoshenq neutralized the threat to Israel by Benhadad, then returned to Egypt.

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5 Zerah is never referred to in the Bible as “pharaoh” or “king” and was probably a general in pharaoh Shoshenq’s Egyptian army. Use of Libyan and Ethiopian mercenaries in the army of Egypt during that period is well documented.

6 Hebron was denoted by its ancient name “Rubuti” on the Karnak inscription, as noted by Fritz Hommel, *The ancient Hebrew tradition as illustrated by the monuments: a protest against the modern school of Old Testament criticism* (New York: E. & J.B. Young, 1897; translated by Edmund McClure and Leonard Crosse), p.232.

Map 2.4 - Campaign of Shoshenq I in Israel (925 BCE)

**LEGEND**
- Judah-Israel border
- Northern campaign
- Southern campaign
- Returning to Egypt
- = a fortified city of Judah
Admittedly, an invasion of Canaan by Shoshenq I during the reign of Asa as proposed above is speculative, but less so than the traditional explanations that associate the Karnak reliefs with the reign of Rehoboam. The advantage of the Shoshenq-Asa scenario as proposed above is that it fits both the Karnak inscriptions and the biblical text. Also, its chronology agrees with the new chronology of the Hebrew kings offered in my book, *Sacred Chronology of the Hebrew Kings*, whereas hypothesizing that Shoshenq I moved against Judah as “king of Egypt” in the fifth year of Rehoboam does not match the facts.

Based on the new kingdoms chronology in my book, Shishak’s invasion of Judah happened during the reign of the pharaoh Siamun (r. 978-959), when Shoshenq (called Shishak by the biblical scribes) apparently commanded Siamun’s army but was not yet a pharaoh. As stated earlier, the biblical references to Shishak as “king of Egypt” are an anachronism. Siamun’s general Shoshenq had become the pharaoh Shoshenq I by the time his two invasions of Canaan were recorded in the Bible.

*This article is an excerpt from* Sacred Chronology of the Hebrew Kings *by Dan Bruce (ISBN 978-0-9816912-3-7; pp. 35-40). The book is available for reading in its entirety at no charge on the Prophecy Society website by using the following link: