

## Appendix A: Egypt and Canaan in the Genesis-Exodus Narratives

It is generally agreed that the biblical stories relating to Egypt and Canaan in the books of Genesis and Exodus were put into writing in the first millennium BCE, probably not before the seventh century BCE. Yet according to many scholars, they contain details that seem to reflect some knowledge of Egypt and Canaan in the second millennium BCE. The question of the historicity of these stories, in particular, the story of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39–50) and that of the Israelites in Egypt and the Exodus (Exodus 1–14), has intrigued scholars for decades. Do these accounts reflect actual historical events? And if so, when might these events have taken place? These questions are still the subject of much debate, as the evidence is ambiguous and open to different interpretations.

It has often been argued that the centrality of these stories, especially the tradition of the Exodus, to Israel's self-definition suggests that they contain at least some historical elements. Egyptologist and Old Testament scholar James Hoffmeier, in his attempt to establish the likelihood of historical nuclei in the biblical account, posed such questions as: Is the picture portrayed by these stories compatible with what we know of Egyptian history? Did the people of Canaan go to Egypt for relief during times of drought and famine? Could a Semite such as Joseph be elevated to a position of prominence, as reported in Genesis 45? Did the Egyptians press foreigners into hard labor, as portrayed in Exodus 1? Do the geographical features and place names in the Hebrew Bible accord with Egyptian place names and geography?

Affirmative answers to these questions based on archaeological and textual evidence from Egypt and Canaan suggest that the stories reflect first-hand knowledge of Egypt and, in all probability, include historical nuclei. Many scholars have attempted to establish the most likely time frames for the events described. Their conclusions range between the Late Middle Kingdom (eighteenth century BCE), the Second Intermediate Period (seventeenth–sixteenth century BCE),

the Ramesside Period (thirteenth–twelfth century BCE), and the Saitic Period (seventh–sixth century BCE). This lack of consensus stems from arguments over the identification and therefore dating of Egyptian personal names (e.g., Potiphar, Zaphenat Paneah, and Moses), place names (e.g., Pithom and Raamses), and terms (e.g., *hartumim* [magicians]) appearing in the biblical text. Do these terms relate to Egypt of the Saitic Period, when the biblical texts were most probably compiled? Or are they anachronisms corresponding to earlier historical periods in Egypt? Even if the terms can be attributed with a reasonable degree of certainty to one or another historical period, is it not possible that the events to which they refer took place earlier? The discussion below sheds light on the problematic nature of the evidence and the controversial state of affairs in scholarly literature.

### Joseph in Egypt

The descent into Egypt by people of Canaan, especially in times of famine, as narrated in the story of Joseph in Egypt, is corroborated by both archaeological and textual evidence. Since the beginning of pharaonic history, the Nile Delta has attracted the pastoral nomads of Sinai and Canaan, who frequently settled in the eastern Delta region – the biblical land of Goshen. As shown above (see pp. 41–42), the influx of Canaanites into the eastern Delta increased during Egypt's intermediate periods, and during the Second Intermediate Period, a dynasty of Canaanite origin, the Hyksos, took control of northern Egypt for more than a hundred years. Could the Joseph story reflect the Hyksos Period? Flavius Josephus, quoting the Egyptian historian Manetho (see p. 41), indeed associated the people of Israel in the biblical story with the Hyksos and dated the Joseph story to the reign of the Hyksos king Apophis. Modern scholars, however, are divided on this issue. While some view such

[Fig. 31] Victory stela of King Merneptah bearing the earliest reference to the name Israel. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 31408

details as the voluntary descent of pastoralists from Canaan into Egypt, the high position of Joseph in the Egyptian court, and connection between the names Jacob and Yaqubhar (a Hyksos king; see no. 12) as support for a connection between the biblical Joseph story and the Hyksos Period, others regard the Joseph story as a literary work with little or no historical value. Still others consider the indirect evidence of Egyptian culture and customs reflected in the story as suggestive of a certain degree of historical reality, though they do not necessarily believe that Joseph was a historical figure. Many Egyptologists have argued for the Late Middle Kingdom – Second Intermediate Period as the most likely historical setting for the Joseph story. Others, however, have pointed out the evidence for high officials of Semitic origin in New Kingdom Egypt, arguing that a New Kingdom setting for the Joseph story should not be ruled out. Still other scholars have dismissed the historicity of the story altogether and consider it a legendary tale composed in the context of the Jewish diaspora in Egypt during the Exilic – Post-Exilic Period (sixth–fifth century BCE).

## Israel in Egypt and the Exodus

As in the case of the Joseph story, some scholars have argued that the biblical text of Exodus 1–14 is a literary source with little or no historical value. Others, however, have presented what seem to be convincing arguments for historical nuclei in the text.

The only mention of the name Israel on an ancient Egyptian monument is on a victory stela of King Merneptah of the Nineteenth Dynasty, dated to his fifth regnal year (ca. 1207 BCE; see fig. 31). The stela commemorates the king's military campaigns against the Lybians and ends with a short record of a campaign in Canaan listing the conquests of the cities of Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yeno'am, followed by the statement "Israel is wasted, his seed is not." The names of the three Canaanite cities on the stela are followed by the typical hieroglyphic classifier of foreign cities, while the name Israel is followed by the classifier of an ethnic group (fig. 32), indicating that an ethnic group called Israel existed in Canaan in the last decade of the thirteenth century BCE. Merneptah was the son and heir of Ramesses II, often called Ramesses the Great owing

to his long reign of 67 years, his numerous military campaigns, and, especially, his large, impressive monuments erected all over the Nile Valley. It was Ramesses II who founded the new capital Pi-Ramesses (Domain of Ramesses) in the eastern Delta, identified by most scholars with Raamses in the biblical text (Exodus 1:11).

As mentioned above, the Manethonian tradition associates the Israelites in Egypt with the Hyksos. The conversion of the Hyksos expulsion into an exodus story has been seen by some scholars as possibly reflecting a genuine historical memory. It has also been interpreted, however, as a reflection of anti-Jewish propaganda in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt and the association of such propaganda with traditional Egyptian antagonism toward the Hyksos. Yet it is of great interest that the site of Avaris (modern Tell el-Daba), the capital of the Hyksos in the eastern Delta, is adjacent to the Ramesside capital Pi-Ramesses (modern Qantir). Moreover, the Ramesside kings were conscious of the Hyksos capital, as indicated by the so-called four-hundred year stela erected by Ramesses II, which commemorates four-hundred years of the cult of Seth of Avaris at the site. The prominence of Seth at Avaris and his special role as patron of the Ramesside kings are attested in royal monuments of both periods (see no. 42). It has been suggested that the four-hundred year stela may have inspired the biblical tradition of the Israelites' four-hundred year sojourn in Egypt, namely, the time span between the Hyksos Period (the Joseph story) and the reign of Ramesses II (the period of oppression). However, it has also been proposed that the four-hundred-year period does not necessarily reflect a historical reality, but rather may point to a collective Canaanite memory of the Hyksos and the Ramesside Periods that helped mold Israelite traditions in the Iron Age. The great impact of collective memory has been discussed in detail in the case of Moses, the leader of the Exodus according to the biblical text, whose name is clearly an Egyptian one. Yet there is no evidence for Moses' existence outside the biblical tradition. The special status of Moses in the Judeo-Christian tradition has been discussed by Egyptologist Jan Assmann as a model for the crucial role of collective memory in a people's perception of history, which does not necessarily have to rely on factual evidence. It has, however, been pointed out that the text of Exodus 1–14 includes information that is verifiable. Semitic slaves are attested in

Egypt from the beginning of the second millennium BCE, especially during the New Kingdom, when prisoners of war were brought to Egypt in great numbers and were regularly subjected to forced labor on the pharaoh's massive building projects. Although there is no consensus regarding the identification of biblical Pithom and Raamses, many scholars associate the story of Hebrew slaves employed in the construction of these cities with the construction projects of Ramesses II, in particular, the construction of his new capital, Pi-Ramesses, identified by most scholars, as already mentioned, with the biblical Raamses. Moreover, Egyptian texts confirm the materials and techniques employed in brick building as described in the biblical text. The story of Israel's sojourn in Egypt has therefore been frequently associated with the reign of Ramesses II, and the Exodus with the reign of Merneptah, considering the mention of Israel on his victory stela. However, one of the main drawbacks of this proposal is the archaeological evidence from Canaan.

The small Iron Age I sites in the Canaanite hill country that are generally attributed to the early Israelites display a material culture that has no association whatsoever with Egypt. Rather, it shows a distinct resemblance to the local Canaanite material culture, which strongly argues for the indigenous origin of the population at these sites. Considering this evidence, it has been suggested that the inhabitants of these sites were mainly dispossessed Canaanites and semi-nomadic groups, such as the Shasu and Apiru, who took advantage of the weakening Egyptian hold on Canaan and settled in the hill country where Egypt had little or no control. Supporting evidence for the Canaanite origin of the early Israelites is suggested by reliefs depicting Merneptah's Canaanite campaign, which are considered to be illustrations of the text on his famous stela that mentions Israel. Three of the scenes depict battles against fortified cities, with Ashkelon specifically named on one; the other two, in which the cities are not named, may represent the battles of Gezer and Yeno'am. The fourth scene, showing a battle in an open field, has been interpreted as an illustration of the part of the text referring to the Israelites. The enemies depicted in all four scenes are presented according to the standard Egyptian format used to represent Canaanites, a fact considered to argue for the indigenous origin of the early Israelites. It should be noted, however, that the association of this scene with the text referring to the Israelites is disputed.

In view of the archaeological evidence from Canaan, it has recently been suggested that the biblical story of Egyptian oppression and the deliverance from slavery refers to Canaan rather than Egypt. According to this theory, the period of bondage corresponds to the long Egyptian occupation of Canaan, while the story of liberation relates to the freedom that ensued upon the downfall of the empire. It has been further suggested that the suffering experienced under the Egyptian yoke by all the tribal groups living in Canaan accounts for the centrality of the Exodus tradition in Israelite society. This suggestion, like many others, reflects the problematic and challenging nature of the available archaeological and textual evidence, which does not offer definitive answers to the questions that have concerned scholars for decades and will most probably continue to concern them in the future.

#### References:

Frerichs and Lesko 1997; Hoffmeier 1996; Levy, Schneider, and Propp, eds. 2015.



[Fig. 32] The name Israel as inscribed on the victory stela of King Merneptah