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THE EXODUS RECORDED ON THE STELE OF MENEPHTAH

BY SIR HANBURY BROWN, K.C.M.G.

THE contemporary history of Ancient Egypt was engraved or painted on the walls of its temples in hieroglyphic writing with illustrations of notable events of the current reign. Thus were chronicled the victories and virtues of the Kings of Egypt whom it was the object of the authors and artists to glorify, without, however, being too particular as to the truth of the record. Such being the sole purpose of the history so recorded on the monuments for the information of the people, it is not surprising that the history of Israel in Egypt is not to be found revealed in the inscriptions. The history of Israel in Egypt as written by the Biblical author, himself an Israelite, gives importance to events which an Egyptian historian of the same period would probably have had no knowledge of, or, even if he had, would not have considered worth recording.

The Bible record of Israel's sojourn in Egypt is limited to the periods covered by the lives of Joseph and Moses. If Moses was the author of the record—a claim supported by Prof. Ed. Naville and Prof. Sayce in their recent publications¹—it is natural that the contents should be such as they are. Quite natural also is the exclusion of the doings of the Israelites from the Ancient Egyptian record of the monuments. For, in the first place, Joseph, though a man of mark, was no more than a minister, and any achievements of his which were worthy of a place in the historical record would have been put to the credit of the king whose deeds it was the purpose of the inscription to magnify, and Joseph's name would not have appeared. Moses, from the Egyptian point of view, was even of less account. At first he was a foundling in the Pharaoh's palace, afterwards a fugitive from justice, and later on a mere spokesman for alien serfs. As for the Israelites themselves in the land of Goshen they were socially, as well as politically, unimportant people. In Joseph's time they were no more than nomad shepherds, and every shepherd was "an abomination unto the Egyptians"; and in the time of Moses they were, moreover, bondmen. They were, therefore, in no wise of those whose doings would ordinarily be found recorded in official archives.

But there was one event, and one only, connected with their sojourn in Egypt which, from an Egyptian point of view, had political significance. A collective act, such as their Exodus, would have been a matter of concern to the State, and a reference to it might not improbably be found in the official record of the time. With the Exodus the sojourn of Israel in Egypt came to an end, so that this, the first event with which

¹ NAVILLE, *Archaeology of the Old Testament*, 1913; SAYCE, *The Higher Criticism and the Monuments*, 1915.

they were connected of sufficient importance to call for the notice of the Egyptian historian, would be at the same time the last. Therefore, it is natural to come to this conclusion that, if any mention of the Israelites is found in those inscriptions which are contemporaneous with Israel's sojourn in Egypt, it will be with reference to the Exodus: and, further, the text may be expected to record the cessation of Israel's connection with Egypt.

Now in 1896 Prof. Flinders Petrie had the good fortune to unearth at Thebes in Upper Egypt a slab, or stele, of black syenite, on the face of which is an inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and in this inscription mention is made of the *I-s-r-a-e-l-u* or Israelites. If, then, the logic of the foregoing part of this article is sound, the inscription on the stele might be expected to contain a reference to the Exodus.

The correctness of this conclusion can be tested by two considerations, (1) the relation between the date of the Exodus and the date of the inscription, and (2) the meaning of that part of the inscription which refers to the Israelites.

First as regards the dates. If the inscription was engraved before the Exodus took place, it could not, of course, refer to that event. If the inscription was of much later date, a reference to the Exodus would be unlikely. But if the inscription was contemporaneous with the Exodus, that is, if it was engraved a short time after the Exodus took place, the conclusion that the reference will be found to be to the Exodus receives further support. There are two dates therefore to determine, namely, that of the Exodus and that of the inscription.

There is no question about the date of the inscription, as it is given in the text of the inscription itself. The stele was engraved to commemorate the great victory which the Pharaoh Menephtah had gained over the Libyans who invaded Egypt, as the inscription asserts, in the fifth year of his reign. The inscription belongs to the same year as the events recorded.

The date of the Exodus cannot be so positively fixed. Professors Petrie, Sayce and Naville and "most Egyptologists" are agreed that the Exodus took place during the reign of Menephtah. Prof. Naville writes in his *Archaeology of the Old Testament*, 1913 (p. 93), "I still adhere to the view advocated first by Lepsius, and still held by most Egyptologists, that the persecutor of the Jews was Rameses II, whose very long reign was the beginning of the decay for the Egyptian Empire, and that the King of the Exodus was his son Menephtah." Prof. Sayce states that "the Egyptian monuments exclude any other reign for that event."

Now, there exists in the British Museum a document known as the papyrus *Anastasi VI*. It contains a letter from a scribe to King Menephtah which runs as follows, as given by Prof. Naville: "We have allowed the tribes of the Shasu of the land of Adima to pass the stronghold or fort of King Menephtah which is in Succoth towards the lakes and ponds of Pithom of King Menephtah in Succoth in order to feed their cattle in the great estate of Pharaoh." This letter was written in the eighth year of King Menephtah's reign. These Shasu, it thus appears, were allowed to occupy the Crown lands in Goshen. It is evident that this could not have been the case if the Israelites had still been in the land of Goshen in the eighth year of Menephtah's reign. Consequently the Exodus must have taken place some time during the previous seven years. This brings the date of the Exodus at any rate very close to that of the inscription. The evidence does not admit of further approximation.

Journ. of Egypt. Arch. iv.

But it has been pointed out in discussions as to the date of the Exodus that the Libyan invasion of Egypt in the fifth year of Menephtah's reign would have created conditions in the East of Egypt, where the land of Goshen was, favourable to the flight of the Israelites. The garrisons along the eastern borders would have been drawn upon to reinforce the army engaged in repelling the invaders in the West and North of the Delta, thus leaving a depleted force to guard the frontier. This is an argument in favour of the view that the two events—the Libyan invasion and the Israelitish Exodus—synchronised.

The internal evidence of the text itself of the inscription remains to be considered. The meaning of that part of the text in which mention is made of the Israelites is discussed in an article by Prof. Edouard Naville entitled "Did Menephtah invade Syria?" published by the Egypt Exploration Fund in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* for December, 1915. The statement relating to the Israelites has been cited by certain authorities as evidence that the Israelites were in Palestine at the time of the events recorded by the inscription. Dr Edward Mahler, in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for January, 1901, and Prof. Petrie, in his *Israel in Egypt* (p. 35), both reach this conclusion, but with logic the reverse of convincing. Prof. Naville, in his article referred to above, contests their reasonings, and shows that the inscription furnishes no warrant for Dr Mahler's conclusion that "we must admit, in consequence of Flinders Petrie's newly discovered stele, that Israel went out of Egypt long *before* Merneptah"; nor for Prof. Petrie's belief that the inscription related to a Syrian war victoriously waged by Menephtah, and that the reference to Israel "shows that some Israelites were then in Palestine."

There have been various interpretations given of the sentence in which Israel is mentioned, of which the following are a selection from those given in Prof. Naville's aforementioned article:

"Israel is desolated, his seed is not." (Breasted.)

"The people of Israel is laid waste, their crops are not." (Griffith.)

"The people of Israel is spoiled, it has no corn (or seed)." (Petrie.)

Accepting Prof. Petrie's foregoing translation, the writer of this article, a few years ago, in the second (1912) edition of *The Land of Goshen and the Exodus*, suggested that this statement might refer to the Israelites when, after escaping into the desert, they were in a condition of much distress and without corn to make bread (Ex. xvi. 3 and 35).

But now Prof. Naville has given us his rendering: "The Israelites are swept off, his seed is no more," and he makes it clear that he understands "seed" to signify descendants, for he points out that the identity of seed and posterity is found in nearly all languages. Of this there are in the Bible numerous instances well known to all. The expression, as thus modified in Prof. Naville's translation, suggests a different interpretation to that founded on Prof. Petrie's translation.

In the original hieroglyphic record there is a detail that is very significant. It is certainly remarkable that whereas all the other peoples named in the inscription are attended by the determinative hieroglyph signifying a foreign *country*—a locality, the name "Israelites" has no such accompaniment, but is, instead, in association with the hieroglyphic group signifying a foreign *people*. The conclusion to be drawn is that Israel was a race of aliens without any fixed and recognised habitation of their own.

They were, as the Bible denominates them, "the children of Israel" and not inhabitants of this or that country. Thus the elements of the inscription itself are opposed to the view that the Israelites were settled in Palestine, but are, on the contrary, favourable to the conclusion that the land "flowing with milk and honey" was not yet occupied, Canaan being still a land of promise and not a land possessed.

Recognising, then, the significance of the different qualifying symbols used for the various peoples named in the inscription, and accepting Prof. Naville's translation and his view as to the meaning of "seed," it seems a natural suggestion to make that the inscription refers to the Israelitish Exodus, representing it as an expulsion from the land of Egypt of an alien race of nomads called Israelites, children and all, who henceforth were "no more" as far as Egypt was concerned (cf. Jer. xxxi. 36). The inscription is, in fact (so it is suggested), the contemporary record of, among other events, the Israelitish Exodus, showing that it took place in the 5th year of Menephtah's reign.

The inscription, besides recording the victory over the Libyans, mentions the existing conditions of neighbouring countries as affecting Egypt, showing that the relations with foreign nations were at the time satisfactory so far as the kingdom of Egypt was concerned. It is in this connection that mention is made of "the people Israel." So important an event as their Exodus, if contemporaneous with the events recorded on the stele, would naturally be given a place in the account. But it would, according to the fashion of Pharaonic times, have been represented as an expulsion by the will of the Pharaoh and not as an escaping against his will. The author of the inscription wrote from a point of view that was not that of the author of the Biblical account. Moreover, Prof. Naville's rendering is not in disagreement with the expression used in Ex. xii. 31: "Rise up, and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel"; and again in verse 39: "because they were *thrust out* of Egypt and could not tarry." Even stronger is the marginal rendering of Ex. xi. 1, R.V.—"when he shall let you go altogether, he shall utterly thrust you out hence."

Now, assuming that the foregoing conclusions are correct, it may be useful to show how the different pieces of the history of Israel in Egypt fit together in exact agreement with the testimony of the Bible and the monuments of Ancient Egypt. Prof. Petrie, in *Egypt and Israel*, gives 1234 B.C. as the date of Menephtah's accession, and places the Exodus at "1220 B.C. or probably rather later." But he assumes that Menephtah conducted a campaign in Palestine before 1230 B.C., whereas Prof. Naville shows that there is no evidence to support this view. Now it is merely on account of that discredited assumption that Prof. Petrie reckons that the Exodus took place in the latter part of Menephtah's reign instead of in the earlier part. The *Anastasi Papyrus*, as has been shown, furnishes evidence which is opposed to his view.

Accepting then Prof. Petrie's date for Menephtah's accession, but rejecting his reckoning of the date of the Exodus as being based on an assumption which has no warrant, the following chronology is drawn up on the theory that the Israelites took advantage of the Libyan invasion to make their escape from Egypt in the fifth year of Menephtah's reign, or 1230 B.C.

	Year B.C.	Reference and authority
Israelites entered Egypt	1660	Ex. xii. 40
Hyksos expelled by Aahmes I—the “new king which knew not Joseph”	1582	Petrie Ex. i. 8 to 14
Reigns of 18th Dynasty Pharaohs	1582 to 1311	
Accession of Rameses I, the Pharaoh of Ex. i. 15 to 22	1311	Ex. i. 15 to 22
Birth of Rameses II and Moses	1310	
Death of Rameses I	1309	
Reign of Seti I	1309 to 1300	
Accession of Rameses II, being 10 years old, the last Pharaoh but one of the period of the Oppression, and the Pharaoh of Ex. ii. 15	1300	Petrie <i>R. Asiatic Soc.</i> , Jan. 1901, p. 41 Ex. ii. 15
Moses fled from Egypt	1274	Acts vii. 23, R.V.
Rameses II died	1234	Acts vii. 30
Accession of Menephtah, the Pharaoh of the Plagues and Exodus	1234	Petrie Ex. v.
Menephtah's victory over the Libyans, and Exodus of the Israelites	1230	Menephtah's stele
Moses 80 years old	1230	Ex. vii. 7