

Getting to Know Your Bible

Was there really an Israelite presence in Egypt?

The topic of whether the people of Israel were ever in Egypt is widely debated. Almost every aspect of this subject is in dispute -- the reliability of the Biblical account (or whether it was even meant to be read as history), archaeological evidence, written Egyptian evidence, and chronological issues. Actually, there is very little *direct* evidence for or against the Israelites being in Egypt. The only explicit mention of the Israelites by Egypt is on the Merneptah Stela -- a big stone detailing a king's victories against nations of Canaan and Syria. The people of Israel are briefly mentioned on this stone.

Although there is not much direct evidence for Israel's presence in Egypt, it is important to remember that there is no direct evidence against Israel's presence in Egypt as well. Even if the Israelites had never been in Egypt, their absence would be extremely hard to prove; the archeological sites and ruins are endangered and can be easily destroyed, given the widespread farming in the Nile Delta Region. Thus the possibility of an event taking place cannot be easily dismissed.

However, there is good evidence for the Israelites being in Egypt. In his book *Israel in Egypt*, James K. Hoffmeier provides an excellent survey of contemporary work done on this topic; the discussion here will be largely based on his work.

First, it is important to realize that there was a large Semitic presence in Egypt. A Semite is someone from the Canaan/Syria region, which includes the Israelites were from. There is both written and archaeological evidence for Semites coming to live in Egypt. This may have happened for a number of reasons: a very common reason was because of climate changes that may have caused drought, such as in the case of the Biblical patriarchs in Genesis. Other reasons may have been commerce, being a prisoner of war, and the slave trade. During the period of about 1800 to 1540 BC, which is the generally accepted time period of the Biblical patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph), the Nile Delta Region, or Lower Egypt, was actually politically controlled by Semites. It was also a very lush and fertile area, so it was an attractive destination for more Semites coming from the Canaan area, and so it seems reasonable that Joseph and, later, his brothers would have come to live in Egypt in this time period.

However, the Egyptians began to run an increased number of

military campaigns in the Palestine area and began to bring back more and more prisoners of war. One statistic reads that a particular Egyptian king over the course of a few campaigns deported 101,128 Semites from their homes to Egypt. As more and more prisoners of war were taken, the Egyptians began to press them into manual labor, building bricks for various uses in construction projects and also working the fields. It is likely that the Egyptians pressed the Israelites into this same labor along with the rest of the Semites -- this would fit the description given in Exodus of the oppression of the Israelites.

Other correspondences exist between the Genesis/Exodus account and Egyptian archaeology, written accounts, and what we know of Egyptian society. Regarding the accounts of Exodus: Hebrew names of storehouses match actual found archaeological sites with corresponding Egyptian names, and the description of slave labor correspond as well. Regarding the account of Joseph: the price and nature of a slave, the type and nature of names, the culture surrounding the dream interpretations and the magicians, the pharaoh's birthday, the pharaoh's granting someone like Joseph his rank and duties, even Joseph's age at death- all of these details are found in both Biblical and non-Biblical accounts. Many scholars agree that these kinds of details would be almost impossible to fabricate, and that the author of the story of Joseph probably had intimate knowledge of Egyptian society, and maybe even lived in Egypt.

Remember that the debate still rages and there is by no means widespread consensus on any of these topics. However, it is important to understand that there is a great amount of information that does indirectly support the Biblical account as being, at the very least, possibly accurate. In the midst of the debate, it is important to remember that there are as many theories as there are scholars who propose them, and many of the theories are based on prior presuppositions scholars may have. For example, many scholars come to the matter having a worldview that allows for no supernatural phenomena, and with a prior assumption that the Biblical text is not historical. However, as we have seen, the Genesis/Exodus account does not tend to conflict with extra-biblical historical sources, but rather meshes with them in surprising ways. As such one can be confident in the biblical account presented in Exodus.

By Will Linton

For further research:

Hoffmeier, James K. *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.