

THE THREEFOLD IMAGE OF EGYPT IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Abstract

The article identifies three different discourses on Egypt in the Hebrew Bible. The political discourse is interested in the politics of contemporary pharaohs and Israelite treaty negotiations with them. In the exodus discourse, Israel projects her historical experiences into a mythical Egypt of the past. The wisdom discourse portrays Egypt with interest and sympathy.

Key words: Egypt, Exodus, Joseph Story, Oracles against the Nations

Introduction

In the year 1997 the German Egyptologist and Cultural Anthropologist Jan Assmann published his book "Moses the Egyptian".¹ His central paradigm is what he calls "The Mosaic Distinction" (1). At first he draws a picture of ancient polytheism which looks rather peaceful: "Ancient polytheisms functioned as ... a technique of translation... The polytheistic religions overcame the primitive ethnocentrism of tribal religions... The cultures, languages, and customs may have been as different as ever: The religions always had a common ground. Thus they functioned as a means of intercultural translatability. The gods were international because they were cosmic. The different peoples worshipped different gods, but nobody contested the reality of foreign gods and the legitimacy of foreign forms of worship" (2f). Later, however, the distinction "between true and false in religion" (1) came into being which in the history of memory is ascribed to Moses. "We may call this new type of religion "counter-religion" because it rejects and repudiates everything that went before and what is outside of itself as "paganism". It no longer functioned as a means of intercultural translation; on the contrary, it functioned as a means of intercultural estrangement" (3). With the Mosaic distinction, a history "full of conflict, intolerance, and violence" (1) begins. Assmann continues: "The Mosaic distinction between true and false in religion finds its expression in the story of Exodus. This means that it is symbolized by the constellation or opposition of Israel and Egypt" (3f).

One will understand that these remarks are a challenge to an Old Testament scholar. With Assmann's ideas in mind, I began to study the Old Testament texts.²

¹ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: the Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1997). All quotes in the following paragraph are from this book.

² The result of my studies is found in full length in Rainer Kessler, *Die Ägyptenbilder der Hebräischen Bibel: Ein Beitrag zur neueren Monotheismusdebatte*, SBS 197 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 2002).

My first observation was: There is not one image of Egypt, but generally spoken, there are three different images. As these images are composed by different texts one could also speak of three different discourses on Egypt. I call them The Political Discourse, The Exodus Discourse, and The Wisdom Discourse. A presentation of these three discourses forms the structure of my paper. At the end, I will briefly discuss some consequences.

I will not begin with the Exodus discourse, as might be expected. This discourse seems to be the best known and the most discussed discourse on Egypt in the Hebrew Bible. Assmann exclusively relies on it. However, the exodus' Egypt is the Egypt of a past that is no longer a political reality in the times when the texts of the Hebrew Bible received their form. Therefore I prefer to start with the contemporaneous discourse. It is mainly the discourse of the prophets from the eighth to sixth centuries on the Egypt of the Kushite and the Saite dynasties.

The Political Discourse on Egypt

Motto: "Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man that leans on it"³ (Isaiah 36:6)

The eighth century BCE is the epoch when the Assyrian empire reaches the Levantine region on its expansionist way to the southwest. The petty states of the region, among them Israel and Judah, are threatened in their existence. At the same time Egypt recovers new strength. The epoch of the Kushites begins. For centuries, these Kushites had formed an independent kingdom in what is now known as Nubia, i.e. the southern part of Egypt and the northern part of Sudan. In the middle of the eighth century, they succeeded in conquering the rivaling dynasties of Egypt and uniting the country. The 25th, the so called Kushite dynasty, now had a common frontier with the Assyrians.

In their struggle for independence from the Assyrian dominance, some forces in the petty Levantine states saw a chance in searching for an alliance with the Kushites. This political situation is clearly mirrored in the texts of Hosea, the prophet of the last decade of the Northern Kingdom. What he describes, could be named as "pendulum policy". "Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense; they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria" (Hosea 7:11). Hosea does not expect any help from Egypt. On the contrary, those who trust in Egypt will find their death: "Their officials shall fall by the sword because of the rage of their tongue. So much for their babbling in the land of Egypt" (7:16). Hosea criticises the Israelite policy because trusting in Egypt means rejecting the help of *Adonai*. "None of them calls upon me", *Adonai* complains (7:7), but, as Hosea states, "they call upon Egypt" (7:11). Hosea has no direct interest in Egypt. He never makes any comment on Egyptian religion, culture, political system, not even on their actual policy. He is not interested in Egypt but, in his Israelite compatriots who trust in Egypt instead of trusting in *Adonai*.

We will find the same constellation in the oracles of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. At the end of the eighth century, the Judean king Hezekiah tried to free his country from Assyrian dominance by a treaty with Egypt. We hear about a Kushite delegation that has come to Jerusalem. Isaiah describes them as strong and powerful people: "Ah, land of whirring wings beyond the rivers of Kush; sending ambassadors by the sea in vessels of papyrus on the waters! Go, you swift messengers, to a nation, tall and smooth, to a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide" (Isaiah 18:1-2). This is quite a proud portrayal of the Kushite delegation. Isaiah does not blame the

³ English quotes from Biblical texts mainly rely on the NRSV, with lesser changes by myself.

Kushites. He criticises the Judean policy for two reasons. First Egypt will not be a real help. Isaiah was realistic enough to see that the Kushites had no interest in a direct confrontation with the Assyrians. Secondly, leaning on Egypt implies rejecting *Adonai*. “Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult *Adonai*!... The Egyptians are human, and not God; their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When *Adonai* stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall, and they will all perish together” (Isaiah 31:1.3).

About a hundred years later, the situation has changed. The Assyrians are replaced by the Neo-Babylonians. Furthermore, the Kushites, who had to withdraw to their land of origin under Assyrian pressure, were substituted by the Saites who formed the 26th dynasty. Nevertheless, the constellation was still identical. Judah found herself in the maelstrom of two imperialistic powers and tried to help herself by a pendulum policy. Like Hosea and Isaiah had done, Jeremiah and Ezekiel blame these politics. They both hold that Egyptian help will not be effective. “...you were a staff of reed to the house of Israel; when they grasped you with the hand, you broke, and tore all their shoulders; and when they leaned on you, you broke, and made all their legs unsteady” (Ezekiel 29:6-7). We know that these prophets were right. For during the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, the Egyptians sent a contingent of troops. However, they immediately withdraw them when the Babylonians moved towards them.

Nevertheless, we find a new element of critique especially in Ezekiel. What is already hidden in the oracles of Hosea and Isaiah, is now elaborated in a more open way. While the older prophets only criticise the trust in Egypt as opposed to the trust in *Adonai*, Jeremiah and especially Ezekiel directly confront the plans of the Saite pharaohs with the plans of *Adonai*. Ezekiel describes the pharaoh as the crocodile or the dragon of mythology who is opposed to God. “Thus says *Adonai* God: I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon sprawling in the midst of its channels, saying, ‘My Nile is my own; I made it for myself’” (Ezekiel 29:3). For the first time in the political discourse, the pharaoh is blamed directly for his hubris. He dares to oppose *Adonai*, and that is why he must perish. However, also in this case the criticism is directed only against the politics of the Saite pharaohs.

The oracles of the prophets generally are not interested in Egypt as such. They are primarily directed against Israelites who trust in Egypt. In the oracles of Ezekiel, the pharaohs are blamed for being opposed to the plans of *Adonai*. This is a criticism of concrete political plans. We never find a criticism of Egypt’s religion nor of its culture, political system, or something similar.

I must add a further observation that leads us to the next point. *The oracles of the prophets never mention the exodus motif*. Would it not have been a wonderful argument to say: How can you rely on Egypt, the house of slavery, from which *Adonai* brought you out? How can you trust in your former oppressors? How can you willingly go back into the iron-smelter (Deuteronomy 4:20)? To nothing of this kind is ever alluded. *The political discourse is neatly separated from the Exodus discourse*.

The Exodus Discourse

Motto: “I am Adonai your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2)

The Egypt of the exodus discourse is the land of a mythical past. Her pharaohs do not have proper names like those of the political discourse wherein four historical known pharaohs

are mentioned (Shishak, 1 Kings 14:25; Tirhakah, Isaiah 37:9; Neco, Jeremiah 46:2; and Hophra, Jeremiah 44:30). Like the kings in fairy tales, they are just “the pharaohs”. The exodus discourse is not a political debate about alliances with foreign powers. It is a *Ursprungsmythos*, a myth of origin. Its nucleus is that there was probably a group of *Apiru* who escaped from Egypt and ascribed their salvation to a god named Yahweh, and who subsequently added their stories to the many narratives of the multiple groups that formed the emerging entity of Israel.

The first point where we can grasp the history of the exodus discourse is the foundation of the northern kingdom. Jeroboam, the first king, dedicates the sanctuaries of the new state to “*Adonai*, your god, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (cp. 1 Kings 12:28). For the northern kingdom, the separation from Solomonic Judah is stylized as the exodus from slavery. Solomon is the pharaoh. The forced labour, that he conscripted out of Israel (cp. 1 Kings 5:13), is the Egyptian slavery. Jeroboam the liberator, who had to flee after a first unsuccessful attempt and who then came back to deliver his people, is in the position of Moses. In this sense the old stories are filled with new historical experiences. They no longer tell about real Egypt or real pharaohs. They reflect the self-understanding of the kingdom of Israel as opposed to that of Judah. It is remarkable that the exodus tradition is only found in the northern prophet Hosea (and perhaps in Amos who prophesied in Bethel), but never in Isaiah or Micah. For the south, the Zion tradition and the Davidic tradition were their myths of origin.

This situation changes after the end of the northern kingdom. Lots of northern traditions (and perhaps already some texts) come to the south. There they are integrated into a pan-Israelite picture of the past as we now know it from the Hebrew Bible. However, the exodus discourse is still open for new experiences. Judah’s main political experience in this epoch was the absolute dominance of the Assyrians. These experiences now are projected into the old exodus narratives. The best example is the portrayal of Moses as anti-Sargon. Sargon II, who conquered the Levantine states, revived the old legend of Sargon of Akkad. According to the legend, Sargon of Akkad was of noble origin but put into the river Euphrates in a basket to hide his birth. He was found by a gardener and brought up by him. Later he usurped the kingdom. As is well known, the story of Moses’ birth is a very close parallel to the Sargon legend. The hidden birth, the basket, the river, the finding, the upbringing, the eventual coming back to the original destination – all this is nearly the same. Only the direction of the movement is opposed. Sargon moves from up to down to up, Moses moves from down to up to down. Thus in the times of Sargon II and his Assyrian successors, Moses is inscribed into the exodus tradition as anti-Sargon.

We know that later, with Deutero-Isaiah and other texts, the exile is compared with the time in Egypt, and the end of the exile is announced as a kind of new exodus. Thus again the exodus discourse is filled with new historical experiences. I will not trace this any further. *It should be clear now that the exodus discourse nearly from its beginning is not a discourse on real Egypt, on real pharaohs, and not even on Israel being in Egypt. The Egypt of this discourse is more like a screen whereupon historical experiences are projected which have nothing to do with real Egypt.*

The projection of problems on a foreign screen is highly problematic of course. What should the real Egyptians think about it? Would they agree that all the problems of the Israelites with their own kings, with the Assyrian conquerors or with the Babylonian exile were treated under the label “Egypt, the house of slavery”? Should they not complain on being used as a scapegoat?

Before I try to give some answers to these questions, we must take note of the fact that there are other texts which form neither part of the political nor part of the exodus discourse. They are more disparate. However, all together they form a third discourse which I call the wisdom discourse.

The Wisdom Discourse

Motto: "Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30 [Hebr. 5:10])

The New Testament tells us a secret which is silenced by the Hebrew Bible: "So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians ..." (Acts 7:22). Indeed, also the Hebrew Bible and the old Israelite society knew that Egypt is a land of wisdom, a state with an effectively functioning administration and a culture with an old tradition. Accordingly, the Judean administration in the 7th and 6th centuries used the Egyptian numerical system to count things on administrative *ostraca*. The author of Proverbs 22:17-24:22 not only knew the Egyptian wisdom text "The instruction of Amenemope", but he also reworked and adapted this text to his Israelite context exactly in the same way as Egyptian wisdom teachers used to adapt older texts. Bernd Schipper, a young German scholar, has collected a great amount of items which show the prodigious influence of Egyptian culture on Israel and Judah in the monarchic period. Among them are the stamp seals and many examples of iconographical influence.⁴

Several biblical texts mirror a certain curiosity for the strange country along the Nile river. Deuteronomy 11:10-11 compares the different modes of production: "For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky." Isaiah 19:5-10 describe the economic conditions in the delta region in such a precise way that a modern commentator is convinced that the author personally must have known the region.⁵ Ezekiel 30:13-19 presents a map of Egyptian towns which is unique in the Hebrew Bible. *No part of the world – except of course Israel herself – is portrayed with so much interest and curiosity like Egypt.*

I have not yet mentioned the outstanding example of the Joseph story. The story provides a lot of information about Egyptian customs. The story allows Joseph to be married with the daughter of the priest of On (Heliopolis) without any critical word (Gen 41:50). The story shows Egypt as a land for refugees. This motif appears throughout the Bible. People who are economically or politically threatened in Canaan can flee to the Nile – from Abraham and Sarah to Jesus and his family. The Joseph story portrays Egypt as a country which has such a good administration that it can guarantee the survival not only of her own population but also of shepherds having come in from Canaan.

But despite all the interest and admiration for Egypt there is no doubt in the Hebrew Bible that Adonai, the God of Israel, is superior to Egypt's wisdom. The counsellors of pharaoh may call themselves wise men (Isaiah 19:11-13), *Adonai* is wiser (Isaiah 31:2-3).

⁴ Bernd Schipper, *Israel und Ägypten in der Königszeit: Die kulturellen Kontakte von Salomo bis zum Fall Jerusalems*, OBO 170 (Freiburg Schweiz: / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht); cp. id., Die Lehre des Amenemope und Prov 22,17-24,22. Eine Neubestimmung des literarischen Verhältnisses, *ZAW* 117, 2005, 53-72.232-248.

⁵ Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja. 2. Teilband. Jesaja 13-27*, BK X/2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1978), 704.

With him his servants are wiser than Egypt's wisdom. Not only "Solomon's wisdom surpassed ... all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30 [Hebr. 5:10]). While in the Acts of Luke "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians..." (Acts 7:2), Psalm 105:22 states: "The king", "the ruler of the peoples" (v. 21), i.e. the pharaoh, made Joseph "to teach his elders wisdom".

Let me turn to my last point. I am going to draw a few conclusions from my observations of the threefold image of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible.

Conclusions

First (1) we must maintain that in all three discourses *Adonai* is shown as superior to Egypt. In the political discourse, he is the one who sets the political agenda, not the pharaoh. In the exodus discourse, he is the liberator from the Egyptian house of slavery. In the wisdom discourse, *Adonai* and his servants surpass all the wisdom of Egypt. Is Jan Assmann then right in saying that the Hebrew Bible constructs a fundamental difference between Egypt's cosmologic and polytheistic culture and Israel's aggressive monotheism? I do not think so.

Secondly (2) none of the three discourses imply any serious critique of the Egyptian religion or culture. The political discourse is only interested in Israelite alliances with Egypt and in the pharaohs' political ambitions. Only in one verse, the god Amon of Thebes is mentioned together with the pharaoh (Jeremiah 46:25); it is the only mentioning of an Egyptian god in the whole Bible. The exodus discourse confronts *Adonai* with pharaoh who says: "Who is *Adonai*, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know *Adonai*" (Exodus 5:2). It is a conflict between oppression and liberation, not a conflict between cultures and religions. The wisdom discourse is remarkably interested in Egyptian culture, though not religion. It never blames Egyptian customs. It only states that *Adonai* is superior and that he is the real source of all true wisdom. So Assmann's picture of a certain "clash of civilizations" between Egypt and Israel in my opinion is not covered by the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

(3) We should take the canonical shape of the Hebrew Bible serious. Before the exodus discourse begins, Egypt is already presented as a land where hungry patriarchs can survive (Genesis 12:10-20; Joseph story). It is a land of good governance that tolerates foreign shepherds to live within her boundaries. The oppression only begins when "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). In a canonical reading, Egypt does not oppress Israel, but two pharaohs do. After the exodus events the story proudly presents Solomon taking pharaoh's daughter as his wife (1 Kings 3:1). Jeroboam again flees to Egypt where he gets protection by pharaoh Shishak (1 Kings 11:40). I should also restate what I said above: The political discourse is always neatly separated from the exodus discourse. The real contemporary Egyptians of the Kushite and Saite dynasties are never compared with their oppressive precursors. The Egypt of the past, i.e. the Egypt of the exodus discourse, has no influence on the assessment of contemporary Egypt.

Though the exodus discourse never is misused to blame contemporary Egyptians, it is in itself highly problematic because it projects inner-Israelite problems on a foreign screen. This leads me to a fourth comment (4). The metaphor of projection is also used in psychoanalysis. Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott in their clinical research as well as Bruno Bettelheim in the interpretation of fairy tales have demonstrated that children in a certain period of their development need to project their conflicts on an object that is outside of them. Winnicott's main symbol is the teddy-bear. The object of projective identification allows children to develop their own identity without permanently putting

their own selves into question. What they must learn in the process of becoming adults is that this mechanism of projection can only work temporarily. Once the identity is developed, one must stop to project one's own problems on foreign screens. To use another metaphor: The screen must be turned into a mirror. I find a lot of traces in the Hebrew Bible where indeed inner problems are not projected to an outside object but where on the contrary the memory of Egypt is used to deal with inner-Israelite problems. In the first place, the allusions to Egypt in the law codes have to be mentioned in this context.

Let me go one step further (5). The biblical texts are not very much interested in Egyptian religion. They do not blame the Egyptian culture or political system. Assmann's rather simple opposition of peaceful translating polytheisms and aggressive intolerant monotheism is not the subject of these texts. They blame Egypt for social oppression or for political hubris, but not for her religion and culture. I would like to generalize this. The future of the world, in my view, does not depend on the alternatives of polytheism or monotheism – or even atheism. It depends on questions like oppression or not, exploitation or not, fundamentalism or not, tolerance or not, ecological responsibility or not. After having accepted this, we can discuss whether polytheism or monotheism or atheism is more adequate to deal with this. But it is not a prerequisite. I think Jesus was right with his parable of the two sons. Not the one who said "I go, sir," but did not go", "did the will of his father", but the one who "answered 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went" (Matthews 21:28-31). The future of the world does not depend on those who say "Lord, Lord" but on those who do "the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthews 7:21).