

Before the Exodus

ISRAEL FROM BONDAGE TO DELIVERANCE

BY DVORA WAYSMAN

Every year we celebrate Passover by retelling the story of the Exodus from Egypt - how G-d delivered us from bitter slavery and bondage by means of the miracle of the Ten Plagues, and brought us to freedom. The concept of freedom is so important that it is the first of the Ten Commandments: I am the Lord thy G-d who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.....

Ancient Egypt

But what do we know of the life of the Jews before the Exodus? Not too much. There are three periods of history in ancient Egypt; the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. The Old Kingdom and its first ten dynasties of pyramid builders ended in 2500 B.C.E., when the Hyksos, Beduin invaders from the Arabian desert, ruled Egypt. They were expelled by the founder of the 18th dynasty in 1587 B.C.E., which marked the New Kingdom until the end of the 20th dynasty in 1100 B.C.E. Later Egypt came under Libyan, Persian, Macedonian and Roman rule.

Biblical interest in Egypt begins during the Middle Kingdom. Joseph served one of the Hyksos kings, who restored and enlarged the temples and encouraged learning. Not long after the death of Joseph, the Hyksos were driven back into Asia and a native ruler gained the throne.

Calamity

This nationalist dynasty was a calamity for the descendants of Jacob. As friends of the overthrown Hyksos kings, they lost their favored position and their past services to the State were ignored. From prosperous settlers

in the Eastern delta of the Nile, they were gradually reduced to serfdom as each successive ruler issued harsher decrees. These rulers were great architects, famous for the number and magnificence of their monuments. This great frenzy of building naturally called for forced labor, and the feared and hated Hebrews seemed the natural choice. The Pharaohs condemned them to cruel slavery as bricklayers and manual laborers. This was utterly alien to their nature and their shepherd traditions.

It is difficult to know who the "new king" who initiated their oppression was. Scripture does not tell us - 'Pharaoh' just being the royal title for the reigning monarch. The Bible aims more to emphasize God's guidance of His people. The hieroglyphic monuments give little data, maybe because not much excavation has taken place in Goshen, the Eastern Delta where the Jews lived. But even when ancient Goshen was revealed, the Egyptian chronicler might have taken little notice of an alien serf-class like the Israelites. Keeping sheep was considered at that time to be a lowly occupation;

"Thy servants have been keepers of cattle from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers; that ye may dwell in the land of Goshen; for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians...." (Gen. XLVI:34).

Forced Labor

There are few references on the monuments to "Apurii" - the Egyptian name for Hebrews. But in a report addressed to an official in the reign of Rameses II, it is written: "Give corn to the native soldier, and also to the Apurii, who are bringing up stones for the great tower of Pa-Ramessu...." This is a rare reference to the Hebrew serfs doing forced labor for the Egyptians.

Egyptian records pass over the entire Exodus in silence, their invariable custom when defeated by any ruler or nation. For instance, the Hyksos conquest of Egypt is the most important political event in Egyptian history, yet no mention is made of this catastrophe in the monuments, although it shook the whole social struc-

ture to its foundations. Only the Biblical writers, among all the Oriental chroniclers, describe defeats as well as victories.

The majority of scholars identify the Pharaoh of the oppression as Rameses II, extravagant and tyrannical, whose dates are given as 1300 - 1234 B.C.E. by Petrie. "He was a vain and boastful character, who wished to dazzle posterity by covering the land with constructions whereon his name was engraved thousands of times, and who prided himself in his inscriptions upon great conquests which he never made." (Navelle). The Exodus is believed to have taken place under his son Merneptah, with whom the decline of Egypt began.

A History of Protest

The memory of Israel's bondage and deliverance is woven into the words of legislator, historian, psalmist, prophet and priest; throughout the ages and it was above all the remembrance of the Exodus which heralded the birth of Israel as a nation. No people would have invented the stain and dishonor of slavery in a foreign country...it was completely contrary to tradition at that time. The whole story of Israel is one long protest against idolatry and inhumanity. Whereas Egypt's religious life revolved around worship of the dead, to which the pyramids are a testament, Judaism has always been a religion of life, declaring man's humanity to man as the most acceptable form of worship to the Creator.

Israel in Egypt was like a child. Only out of Egypt could it grow, uncontaminated by the poisonous influence of a decadent civilization. When we re-tell the story of our bondage, it has a greater significance hearing it in Israel, in our own independent land. Now, we do not say: "Next year in Jerusalem" for we are already here. We say: "Next year in Jerusalem the Rebuilt," referring to the Messianic vision of the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Isaiah calls it the 'city of righteousness' and Lamentations says it was "full of people...great among the nations, princess among the cities and the reflection of beauty, the joy of all the earth."

Happy Passover

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