

A NEW HISTORICAL HYPOTHESIS FOR THE PRESENCE OF HEBREWS IN EGYPT

Survey from the beginning of the Asiatic emigration to Egypt
until the end of the Hyksos occupation

First Part : The Character of Joseph

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*" Before Joseph son of Jacob the Fayum was only a sea;
and before being cultivated he was only a swamp receiving
the out-flow of the waters of Upper Egypt."*

Oral tradition of Fayum reported by LINANT DE BELLEFOND Bey.

It was already known from an ancient tradition (Herodotus II, 99), that before Menes the Nile flowed further West. To protect Memphis against the outburst of the river this king shifted its course towards East. Thus, according to LINANT DE BELLEFOND the derivation which now accompanies the river Nile at West from Deirut to El Ashumein (Hermopolis magna) over 300 km, is in fact the former bed of the river. But most remarkable is the fact that Egyptians still call today this stream which seems to be a duplication of the Nile : Bahr Youssef "the river of Joseph". According to classical historians (Herodotus II, 149 150, Strabo XVII, 1:37) this bypass was used in season of high water to conduct a portion of the Nile flood into the channel of Illahun, itself equipped with locks allowing to regulate the level of the great reservoir called Lake Moeris by ancient authors at the bottom of Fayum depression (nowadays Birket el Karun). Moreover, throughout the course of Bahr Youssef numerous traces of channelling works were discovered.

It is therefore in Fayum, this vast oasis west of the Nile valley in Middle Egypt, that the collective Egyptian memory remembered through centuries the work of Joseph the Hebrew, one of the most astonishing characters of the Bible after the no less fascinating Moses. In fact, the earliest written mention of this tradition came to us from the Pharaonic times, dates on the 10th century B.C. It appears in the book of the Arabian author AL MASUDI entitled "The golden Meadows" (1) where he reported the history of Fayum district of Upper Egypt: "Its channels in the elevated part, and in the depression the works undertaken by Joseph in order to fertilize this country, whereas it was before a kind of funnel where infiltrated the waters of Upper Egypt, which surrounded it by nearly all the sides like an island. All the details, he said, were given in our "Middle Book". (Unfortunately since then this book was lost).

It is then the Egyptian geographer of Arabian language EL MAQRISI (13th century A.D.) who in his description of Egypt, after referring to AL MASUDI, gives us some supplementary details on the works of Joseph: "Joseph was given in charge by Pharaoh to dry the Fayum ; he dug the Menha (a channel ?) and built Allahun. And concerning the dam of Allahun, he notices that there was "some aqueducts on arks, constructed in stones and that these ark aqueducts had doors of the number of ten". This seems to correspond to the locks mentioned by ancient authors, whose remains had been still visible on his time.

It is therefore these different testimonies of the past who encouraged us to search in Egypt some indices allowing to verify the biblical data. Now we will turn toward the discoveries of archaeologists in an attempt to recover some historic indices of the brilliant career of Joseph.

I. The problem of the historic frame

The first difficulty encountered by the numerous researchers (3, 4, 5) who already examined the question was for situating this biblical episode in time. As for the Bible (Gen 47: 11) it mentions namely a pharaoh Ramses (IXth and XXth dynasties), while the Jewish historian of Roman times Flavius Josephe (Against Apion, I, 92) quoting other ancient authors claimed that the exodus of Hebrews coincided with the end of the Hyksos domination on the Nile delta, period situated between the Middle and the New Kingdom, that is to say between 1720 and 1550 B.C. according to the chronology currently admitted by egyptologists. Moreover, JEHUDAH (3) already noticed in 1934 that according to the name of the supreme god of Canaanites appearing several times in Genesis (for example 33: 20 and 46: 3), the narration concerning Joseph should be situated before the cult of Baâl had supplanted that of his father El in Canaan, that is to say before the Hyksos period.

It is then REDFORD (4) who in 1970 put this biblical episode on the middle of the XIIth dynasty, adopting the method of counting already proposed by T. Erie PEET (5) in 1923, who used a chronology of Egypt higher than that currently admitted. So, basing on the date of construction of the Salomon temple evaluated by historians on 966 B.C. according to the chronology of the kings of Tyr, and adding to it the interval of 480 years indicated by the Bible, one gets 1446 B.C. for the date of Exodus. This date could correspond to the last part of the reign of Thouthmosis III when lived a priest named Mose in Egyptian, that is to say for us Moses. From there, taking as basis a Hebrews stay in Egypt of 430 years (Ex 12: 40 41), one gets the date of 1876 B.C. for the arrival of the tribe of Jacob, that is to say under the reign of Sesostris II, 4th sovereign of the XIIth dynasty. Now, as we are going to see, this date corresponds precisely to an event apparently without particular significance

reported in the tomb of the nomarch Khnum-hotep II in Beni Hassan, but which will induce enormous consequences for all the country.

On the other hand, it is known that the big works of harnessing of the hydraulic network of Fayum were achieved by pharaohs of the XIIth dynasty, mainly Sesostris III to which is attributed the realization of the big lake Moeris (6). So it appeared interesting to scrutinize the historic and archaeological contexts of this period, evidently very distant from the Bible composition (IVth-VIth century B.C.), but which culture arrived to us through the texts of hieratic papyri (6) and frescoes of tombs accompanied by hieroglyphic texts (7, 8, 9).

1. The first arrival of Asiatics in Egypt:

So, our first chronological reference is supplied by the tomb of the nomarch Khnum-hotep II in Beni Hassan (7) dated on the end of the reign of Sesostris III (5th sovereign of the XIIth dynasty, Middle Kingdom). This high official was governor of the Oryx nome in Middle Egypt under the reign of three pharaohs : Amenemhat II, Sesostris II and Sesostris III. On a wall of this tomb (mastaba) a fresco in color shows a small troupe of men and women clothed in the Asiatic way, accompanied by donkeys carrying children and some ingots of copper (metal which served of currency for commercial exchange). The hieroglyphic commentary reports that in the sixth year of the reign of Sesostris II, Khnum-hotep and his men returning from an expedition in the east desert to bring back some stone of khôl (galena), escorted 37 Asiatics (Amorites ?) who were coming to Egypt. The chief of the tribe identified himself as the "heka khase Abish" that is to say "Prince of the mountaneous country of Abish." This toponyme could correspond today to the district of Al-Habis near Petra in Jordan. A mirror site is located more to North near the Yabbok, a wadi (river) not far from Byblos. This name of Abish could correspond to the population named Jebusites cited as inhabitants of the country of Canaan in the Bible (Gen 10: 16, Ex: 3: 8). Perhaps this name had for origin the semitic expression Ah-beth that is to say "the house of god Yah" the Moon, which was probably pronounced as Iar or Ierah, a minor male divinity of aggressive mood who was essentially associated to the great god Thoth by Egyptians.

The biblical text (Gen 46: 6 27) tells us that the total number of the members of the tribe of Jacob-Israel rose to 70 people (men, women and children), while the Septuagint and the version of Qumran say 76. Knowing that the Egyptians in that time counted only the men, we will consider that the number of 37 Asiatic emigrants reported in the tomb of Khnumhotep II could correspond to the biblical data.

So, we will take as first assumption that the Asiatic bedwings entered in Egypt under the reign of Sesostris II were the relatives of Joseph. This event dated on 1876 B.C. by egyptologists (according to the chronology of the reigns of the XIIth dynasty based on an helical rising of star Sothis (Sirius) registered in the 8th year of Sesostris III), would correspond therefore to the 2nd year of famine according to Genesis 47: 24-25.

2. The arrival of Joseph in Egypt :

Concerning Joseph, the Bible tell us that he came to Egypt when 17 years-old (Gen 37: 23) and that he was 30 years-old when he was presented to pharaoh (Gen 41: 37 46). But it didn't say us his age at the arrival of Jacob. However according to the biblical data, at least nine years have passed since his entrance to the court: seven years of abundance and two years of famine (Gen 41: 47 and 45: 7), that allows to think that Joseph had arrived in Egypt about 22 years before the tribe of Jacob, that is to say toward 1897 B.C. in the last part of the reign of Amenemhat II which lasted 35 years (1916-1881 B.C.)

II. Historic reference of the career of Joseph

1. Datings and localizations :

According to the precedent data, Joseph could become minister of pharaoh circa 1884 B.C. at the end of the reign of Amenemhat II. The Bible tell us that he was 30 years-old and that he lived 110 years. So he had ceased his functions before the end of the reign of Sesostris III which ended in 1839 B.C. (when Joseph had been 90 years-old). He had thus been able to serve three pharaohs : Amenemhat II, Sesostris II and Sesostris III. That seems confirmed by EL MAQRISI (2) who reports that the pharaoh of Joseph was called "Raisan," name which could be an abbreviation for Re-Sanousret (Sesostris in Greek).

By other part, the treasure of Tôd (a city little south of Hermopolis) which dates on Amenemhat II reign included many objects of Asiatic origin, and mainly some bowls in silver (10). And it is asserted that relations really existed between Egypt and Canaan from the reign of Amenemhat II (11, 12).

Indeed, many tombs of high officials of the XIIth dynasty, mainly nomarchs and viziers were discovered in Egypt. We thought that with a little luck the tomb of Joseph could be among them, even though his bones had been taken away by Moses on the Exodus as mentioned in the Bible (Ex 13: 19).

From this point of view, the archaeological site of El Berseh (8, 9) seems particularly interesting. It is located in the Hare nome in Middle Egypt which capital was Khnumu

(Hermopolis Magna for Greeks), the main sanctuary of Thoth the great god of knowledge and magic.

In El Berseh there are the tombs of several generations of princes of the Hare nome, most of them were nomarchs or high priests of Thoth in Hermopolis. They were also in charge of high administrative functions in the court of the royal residence. They were so powerful in their province that they dated their official acts in number of years from their hold of function, like pharaoh himself. In the tomb of Thoth-hotep son of Kay (8), a fresco represents the moving of a monumental statue of this prince sculpted in a block of several tons, drawn with the aid of ropes by two hundred workers. Now, it is remarkable that pronounced by the Egyptians the name of Thoth-hotep (meaning "the one that honors Thoth") is equivalent to our pronunciation of Joseph, certainly through the Greek name Tsozophis (as Amenhotep gave Amenophis).

2. The Career of Joseph

But how a simple Asiatic shepherd sold as slave in Egypt, could become the highest official of Pharaoh, whereas it is known that for mainly religious reasons Egyptians have many difficulties to assimilate foreign people ? The Bible gives us the explanation: Joseph have married the daughter of a high priest (Gen 41: 45) and become thus perfectly accepted by Egyptians (Gen 44: 32).

Moreover the Bible says that Joseph was named by Egyptians "Zaphnathpaneah" (Gen 41: 45). Until now this name was variously interpreted without arriving to a satisfactory solution. For our part, we think that he could correspond to the Egyptian expression "Thot nakht erpa en Ah" that is to say "the one considered by Thoth, the prince of the nome of Ah", Ah being the name of god Moon, the bellicose male partner of Thoth in the sanctuary of Hermopolis.

Although the Bible specifies us that Joseph had married the daughter of a priest of the city of One (Gen 41: 44), which was interpreted until now as One, a city of the delta named Heliopolis by Greeks, the city of Hermopolis Magna (El Ashumein), capital of the Hare nome (where originated the princes buried in El Berseh), was called Un diminutive of Unu from Khnumu its Egyptian name, because the cult of Thoth there have replaced that of Khnum a more ancient potter god. Now, it is a fact that on this time the hereditary functions could be transmitted by the daughters, that is to say that a son-in-law could inherit the titles and functions of his father-in-law (8). It is thus by marrying a daughter of Thoth-hotep, high priest of Thoth in Unu temple and governor of the Hare nome, that Joseph aka Thoth-nakht had inherited the titles of his father-in-law and become after him a high dignitary in the

court of pharaoh. The wife of Joseph thus could be one of the two daughters of Thoth-hotep whose names were willingly erased on the wall of the tomb. The name of this girl could be Hathor-nakht "the one considered by goddess Hathor" because in the Bible, the wife of Joseph was named Asanat which could be a contraction of Hathor-nakht. As so much as her mother, the wife of Thoth-hotep, was named Hathor-hotep "the one who honors Hathor".

Finally, the Bible seems to confirm our hypothesis on the relations of Joseph with god Thoth, as it said that after having interpreted dreams, the son of Jacob exercised divination by help of a bowl in silver (Gen 44: 2 and 15), a practice called lecanomancy which consists to interpret the shape taken by a drop of oil put on the water surface.

Finally, it is known that Thoth-hotep, prince of the Hare nome, was related by his grandmother Bakt, a daughter of Khnum-hotep I, to the princes of the Oryx nome contiguous to the Hare nome (8). So the meeting of Khnum-hotep II with the 37 Asiatics in the Eastern desert, instead of being the fact of luck, could happen on the will of Thoth-hotep who had asked his relative Khnum-hotep II to welcome the family of Joseph his son-in-law, as so much as the translation of the commentary of the fresco of Beni Hasan proposed by VERNUS (13) seems to go to this sense. The expression "to bring back 37 Asians" at the infinitive can indeed let suppose a second order of mission added the first goal of the expedition (to bring back some stone of khôl) : at the same time to welcome the Joseph's family.

As for the supposed prediction of the seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine, it probably came from the archives of the temple of Thoth in Hermopolis priests systematically consulted in the difficult periods, as testified by the stele of Sehel (14) which dates on the ptolemaic period. By other part, in the tomb of Imhotep (Teti-anekh) in Sheik Saïd, there was an inscription recalling some works of restoration done on the monument by a certain Thoth-nakht son of Teti (15), who could be the character that interests us. Indeed, it is necessary to know that the tomb of the famous minister of Djoser was in the same necropole that the tombs of some high officials of the VIth dynasty, whose the nomarchs of Hermopolis under the reign of Sesostri III claimed to have for ancestry. And these tombs of the VIth dynasty had been restored by the same Thothnakht. So our Thoth-nakht, aka Joseph become prince of Hermopolis by marriage, could have therefore in charge some works of restoration in the tombs of the forebears of the family in Sheik Saïd. Besides that, as a member of the clergy of Toth, he could access the archives of the temple like the priests of the cult of Imhotep in the ptolemaic period.

3. The political consequences of the famine :

Finally, according to the count of years based on the date of arriving of the 37 Asiatics of Beni-Hassan, the last year of famine could take place in 1870 B.C., that is to say at the beginning of the reign of Sesostris III. Now it is also at that time that happened a real resumption of power by the young pharaoh on the whole territory of the Egypt (16, 17) : he regrouped the nomes into three waret, new jurisdictions directly supervised by the vizier, and that at the expense of the princes governors of province. Indeed it is in this time that the rich tombs of local potentates disappeared. So, this sudden "administrative reform" could precisely correspond to the situation of Egypt after the 7 years of famine. The Bible says (Gen 47: 20): "Egyptians having sold all their lands to Joseph at the profit of pharaoh to buy wheat, all the country belonged then to Pharaoh, except the lands of priests who were traditionally fed at the expenses of Treasure." Indeed the lineage of nomarchs of Beni Hassan was interrupted from the beginning of the reign of Sesostris III, but the one of the princes of Hermopolis buried in El Berseh was prolonged up to end of this reign, when they disappeared just in the moment of their highest prosperity.

4. The tale of the Oasien or the eloquent peasant:

Moreover, our hypothesis identifying Joseph with a prince named Thoth-nakht could be confirmed by the characters put in stage in the famous "Tale of the Oasian" (18). This narration mentions the reign of pharaoh Neb-kau-re (Montu-hotep II) of the XIth dynasty, but it was lately dated of the second half of the XIIth dynasty (18) because there could be a confusion with Amenemhat II whose name of reign was Nebu-kau-re. In this narration, besides the character of the eloquent peasant, the main actor of the action is an official named Toth-nakht, son of a landowner named Isery. The correspondence with our Joseph Tothnakht, son of Jacob-Israel is obvious. And as noticed by SIMPSON (20), this text of insignificant appearance could testify of the fed up of the Egyptian fellah exposed to the increasing arrogance of some administrators of Asiatic origin serving the pharaonic power under the ministry of Joseph. Because, after beginning his official career as collector of wheat, Joseph aka Thoth-nakht could become in the space of some years the most powerful men of the kingdom after pharaoh Sesostris III himself, as testified by an inscription in hieratic scripture engraved in the career of Hatnub (Gr. I) (21) where a certain Thoth-nakht son of Toth-hotep claims to be " The Treasurer of king of Lower Egypt, intimate friend of the king, supervisor of the priests, high priest of Toth," "the one whose Toth advanced the position, his genuine son born by Seshat" (the spouse of Toth, goddess of writing). Unfortunately this inscription was not dated by a pharaonic reign.

5. Localization of the Land of Goshen

Finally, it is not possible to treat the stay of the Hebrew in Egypt, without considering the problem of the Land of Goshen. The origin of this toponyme remains, since apparently he was never mentioned in the Egyptian texts, although one thought to recognize it in the hymn to Sesostris III in the form of Geshem (6).

Though the Jewish tradition seems to situate Goshen southwest of the Palestine (Jos 10: 41), constituting thus the northeast border of Egypt, he seems paradoxical that a semi-desertic territory outside of Nile valley could be considered as "the best place of the land of Egypt " according to Genesis 47: 11.

However there are several reasons to think that Goshen was North of Egypt. It is necessary to notice that the word "Goshen" which appears in the Bible as "the Land of Guesem (Judith I, 9-10) is definite as spreading from Pi-Ramses by over of Tanis and Memphis, that could therefore correspond to the whole delta with the Fayum oasis, the border with the south being locked by the fortress of Herakleopolis (Nen nesou), as we will see farther.

The Fayum basin entirely irrigated and particularly fertile constituted in this time the attic of wheat for Egypt and also the best area of pasture because of his abundant cover of papyrus. On the other hand, it was relatively isolated from the Nile valley, what could allow to separate the shepherds and their herds from the Egyptian population (Gen 46: 34), while keeping them close to the royal residence of Kahun (Ha-Senousret) where lived Joseph as minister of pharaoh. By other part, pharaoh had confided the relatives of Joseph to take care of his own herds (Gen 47: 66) which could pasture in Goshen. Besides, at the end of the hyksos period the Theban princes argued to the regent Kamose that their herds were allowed to pasture securely in the North occupied by Asiatics (22).

Finally, if the cradle of the nomarchs d'El Berseh was in Upper Egypt (Hare nome), for the most ones they exercise their functions at the court of the residence which since the XIth dynasty was in the North and more precisely in Kahun (Ha Senousret) from the reign of Sesostris III. This would thus confirm that Pharaoh had offered to the tribe of Jacob to install in the Fayum oasis, close to Kahun where Joseph lived as minister and intimate friend of the king.

Moreover, the part of "collective lodgings" situated west of the big palaces of the city of Hotep-Senousret (Kahun), was completely separate by a continuous wall and contained quantity of objects of Asiatic origin (23), as well as some tombs of children buried under the soil of the apartments, a custom foreign to Egypt but also discovered in cities of the delta at the Hyksos times (24). And BENJAMIN of TUDELE citing the Arabian historian NURTADI

identifies Pithom, the city warehouse mentioned by the Bible, with "Pi Tum, the west, the region at the foot of the channel (Ro-hunt ?) in which the surplus of wheat was stocked". This could correspond to the city of Kahun which included numerous warehouses in his southeast part.

At the beginning of the 20th century there was still a Mountain of Gheshen" (4600 m) in Ambara, a province north of Abyssinia, and an Ethiopian tradition says that gheez, a dead semitic language still used in the Christian liturgy of this country, was the language of the Sphepherds, that is to say of Hyksos (25, 26). Now, as astonishing as this affirmation can appear this fact could confirm that the "land of Guesem" corresponded to the North of Egypt, and more precisely to the zone occupied by Hyksos under the XVIe and the XVIIe dynasties. (This would deserve to be more explicited, but the logic of this reasoning will appear clearly when we will treat of Hyksos and Moses.)

Finally, for the linguists, we will propose that the term "goshen" of the Bible could proceed from the Egyptian expression "goshe ounmy" meaning the left side. Since the Egyptian always orientated toward South, the left side of the delta corresponded to its oriental part "the land of Ramses" as precised by the Bible.

DISCUSSION

However, in spite of all these elements we didn't find any precise indication to identify the biblical character of Joseph son of Jacob with some member of the family of nomarchs of the Hare nome. Despite the numerous inscriptions of the tombs and the grafitti discovered in the quarry of Hatnub, it is presently very difficult to establish the express relationship between all the members of this family whose tombs spread from the end of the Old Kingdom up to the end of the reign of Sesostris III (Middle Kingdom). In fact, the biblical character of Joseph in his dizzy official ascension could be a synthesis of the biographies of at least three generations of these princes.

So, between the tombs of El Berseh and the graffiti of Hatnub, we found three Thoth-nakht belonging to different generations, and among them a Thoth-nakht son of Khennater, "Treasurer of the wheat lands" who had exercise his functions at the end of the Old Kingdom; while the one nearest of the concerned period, Thoth-nakht son of Nehera was an uncle of the great Thoth-hotep (supposed the father-in-law of Joseph), who was himself nomarch and high priest of Toth, and certainly with very important functions in the royal court, because his coffin was carried by representatives of pharaoh himself and of all the regions of the Egypt.

On the other hand, the great Thoth-hotep himself was reared as "child of the king" under Amenhemat II, and under the reign of Sesostris II he had the title of "unique friend of the

king." While according to the Bible, Joseph besides his role of collector of grains, was "father of pharaoh, master of his house and regent of all the country of Egypt."

So, if he is not doubtful that if Thoth-hotep whose family already existed under the VIth dynasty (8) was really a genuine Egyptian, the Thoth-nakht born of Thoth-hotep mentioned in the quarry of Hatnub could correspond to Joseph the Hebrew, who marrying the daughter of a high priest could become a full member of this very ancient family of princes. It is remarkable that the mysterious character of Hatnub, though he didn't claim the title of nomarch, didn't hesitate to qualify himself as "the last offshoot of a royal lineage, when the men were in confusion, when the common was powerful," period which could correspond to the end of the reign of Sesostris III when the sons of Thoth-hotep could already be dead and when the former nobility ruined by the famine had no more the means to exercise the royal power in the countrysides, while the hegemony of priests and the power of arrived officials were reinforced.

Moreover, in El Berseh archeologists didn't discover any tomb belonging to a Thoth-nakht son of Thoth-hotep. This could confirm that his relics were not destined to stay buried in Egypt. (Not any tomb of the sons of the great Toth-hotep was either recovered).

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