CHAPTER EIGHT

THE EGYPTIAN BACKGROUND OF THE JOSEPH STORY

The last three chapters have attempted to trace the literary history of the Joseph Story through an inductive approach. It is now time to see whether our postulated literary history of the piece can be confined within chronological limits; and to do this we must set aside the inductive method, and subject the details of the story to a comparison with external data.

INTRODUCTION

The Joseph Story is set in the age of the Patriarchs.1 According to Exod. 12: 40 f. the Israelites departed from Egypt four hundred and thirty years after Jacob’s family had entered the land in the second year of the famine (Gen. 45: 11); and according to 1 Ki. 6: 1 the fourth year of Solomon fell in the four hundred and eightieth year after the Exodus. Although the reigns of the Israelite United Monarchy are incapable of absolute dating, it is generally agreed to-day that the beginning of Solomon’s reign fell around the middle of the Tenth century B.C. Albright’s date is c. 961 B.C.2 On the basis, then, of the Biblical chronology, Jacob entered Egypt in the first half of the Nineteenth century (1871 B.C. on Albright’s date for Solomon), and Joseph was sold thither not long after the turn of the Twentieth century. In the Nineteenth century A.D., when Egyptologists in the main still took Manetho’s dates seriously, such a phenomenally high date for Joseph caused no alarm. It would have fallen during the Hyksos period of Egyptian history,3 and already in Roman times Christian and Jewish exegetes had asserted that Jacob had come to Egypt in the seventeenth year of the Hyksos king Apophis.4 Joseph’s sudden rise to power would be plausible, since the Hyksos were semitic-speaking Asiatics like himself; and references to horses would not be anachronistic, because it was the Hyksos who introduced these into Egypt.

1 For the following, see the thorough discussion of Rowley, From Joseph to Joshua (London, 1950), 57 ff.
3 Manetho allots 511 years to the Hyksos.
4 Africanus: cf. A. Erman, ZAS 18 (1880), 126 f.
It is still maintained by many that the descent into Egypt is to be dated to the Hyksos Period. But they cannot hold this view on the basis of the alleged coincidence of Biblical and Egyptian chronology outlined above. For it is now virtually certain that Hyksos rule in Egypt, as the Turin Canon has long been known to declare, lasted little over a century.\footnote{Turin Canon, x, 21: Sir A. H. Gardiner, \textit{The Royal Canon of Turin} (Oxford, 1959), pl. 3. The Turin Canon is a king list, now fragmentary, written in the reign of Ramesses II (1290-1226 B.C.).} If Ahmose, the founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty, came to the throne in 1567 B.C.,\footnote{Redford, \textit{JNES} 25 (1966), 124.} and if he expelled the Hyksos between his fifteenth and his twentieth years,\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, \textit{The History and Chronology of the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty} (Toronto, 1967), 48 f.} the establishment of Hyksos power cannot be dated much before 1650 B.C.! If the Biblical chronology is adhered to, Joseph will have come to Egypt in the middle of the Twelfth Dynasty, not the Fifteenth (Hyksos)!

The foregoing discussion suggests that the historicity of the Joseph Story has been already premised; but at this point such a premise would be premature. An empirical investigation must first of all set out to establish when the \textit{sources} for the alleged historical occurrence were written. Modern historians, and even classical historians, often date themselves for the benefit of their readers; but this practice was uncommon in the ancient Near East. The dating of a Near Eastern historical narrative must proceed by devious means. The investigator must take into account the language in which the piece was written, the apparent philosophical or theological bias of the writer, the cultural details with which he filled in the background—in short, anything which might possibly give a clue to the writer’s own age.\footnote{The writer agrees completely with Mendenhall’s statement: “It is becoming quite clear that the solution of the problem will come from the treatment of details which seem to be incidental or accidental. Narratives which contain names or specific forms of cultic action, patterns of thought, or other concrete cultural features which can be checked by extra-Biblical sources can thus be controlled, or at least to some extent;” \textit{apud} G. E. Wright, \textit{The Bible and the Ancient Near East} (Garden City, 1961), 42.} Even then the results may not be clear cut. The assembled evidence may indicate a wide range of dates, running through several widely-separated periods of time. The explanation of this anomaly would be that, though the writer is dated to the latest period attested, he had access to, and is using, reliable, perhaps written, material from much earlier periods. The other extreme is a piece which reflects consistently only