CHAPTER NINE

THE DATE OF COMPOSITION

Arguments have been advanced for dating the Egyptian colouring of the Joseph Story to the Saite Period, or thereabout. What bearing, if any, does this conclusion have on the date of the composition of the narrative itself? The investigation is now bordering on the broader question of the nature of literary composition and transmission in the ancient world. Exactly what is the background detail an index of, the date when the story was composed, or merely the date of the final redaction? Is it possible for a narrative to be passed on orally (or for that matter in written form) over centuries, while in the process all traces of its ancient origins are obliterated and only the latest stage of accretions remains? Or will such an ancient tale in its latest form display a stratified deposit of all the centuries through which it has passed? If the former is the case it would be possible to maintain, as many do at present,1 that the Joseph Story is one of ancient origin which has been repeatedly re-edited over the centuries, and yet still accomodate the late date to which the evidence of the Egyptian background points by asserting that in Gen. 37-50 we have the very latest edition which has driven out all trace of earlier material.

It is difficult to combat such an hypothesis except by recourse to analogy. There are sufficient examples from the ancient Near East of texts of which we have but a late copy, whose antiquity is proven beyond a shadow of doubt by internal evidence. One could cite the Memphite Theology, preserved in a copy of the seventh century B.C., and numerous Ptolemaic temple inscriptions which show great antiquity. Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride, the only connected account we possess of the Osiris myth, is full of ancient material. The Book of Judges, to cite but one Biblical example, though manifestly written at a late date, contains genuine legends of great age. Somewhere in each of these literary works, in motif, onomasticon or incidental detail, the

antiquity of the piece shows through, whatever anachronistic detail may have accumulated later. A priori it is inconceivable that an ancient legend or theological treatise should in the course of the centuries be stripped of all trace of its true age.

It is significant that in the Joseph Story one can discern no ancient substratum pointing to an earlier period in the transmission of this particular tale.¹ This statement does not ignore the theory elaborated by Albright and May that behind Gen. 37 lies an old fertility myth;² but it is yet to be proved that there is an historical connexion between such a myth and the opening episode of the Joseph narrative, in other words, that the writer consciously reworked the myth. Nor does the statement ignore the genuine antiquity of Gen. 39, which shows the same theme as the Egyptian Two Brothers; yet Gen. 39 is the one episode in the present narrative which can with ease be shown not to be an integral part of it, but rather an interpolation.³ We have tried to point out that the Egyptian detail reflects the Saite period, or later. In agreement with this dating is the vocabulary of the story, which displays well over fifty words or expressions elsewhere found in literature of Exilic or Post-exilic date.⁴ There are no archaisms, nor even a conscious attempt to archaize.

\[\text{DISCREPANCIES IN THE EARLY TRADITIONS}\]

But the absence of an ancient substratum becomes most apparent when one notes how alien the Joseph Story is to the early historical traditions of Israel, and how ill it fits into its Patriarchal setting. It is

¹ The standard retort that "the Joseph Story has been modified and modernized in the course of transmission" (Freedman, loc. cit.) is unacceptable. If it were "modernized" to the point of eliminating all ancient material, on what evidence can we postulate an ancient origin? The postulate becomes nothing more than the product of wishful thinking. Gressmann (ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ, 12 ff.) tried to show that the Joseph Story reflects stages in the settlement of the early Hebrews, one tradition in the narrative depicting Jacob's family as semi-nomadic shepherds, and another as farmers. This, it seems to me, is an erroneous idea which stems from a misunderstanding of the picture drawn of Jacob in the story. Jacob is there pictured as a typical member of the landed gentry: he owns land from which he derives crops, and he owns sheep which his sons pasture for him. He is very like Nabal, who has flocks (1 Sam. 25: 2), and by implication farm land as well (vs. 18). See above, p. 21, n. 4.

² Albright, JBL 37 (1918), 111 ff.; H. May, AJSL 47 (1930), 83 ff.; cf. J. M. Allegro, ZAW 64 (1952), 251, n. 5.

³ Above, p. 146 ff.

⁴ Listed above, p. 54 ff.