A Questionable Theory of Egyptian Influence on a Genre of Hebrew Literature

A letter that I once received from Edward Ullendorff expressed doubt about the probability of the view that a particular part of the Hebrew Bible had been influenced by an Egyptian text, as I had argued in agreement with a number of scholars. Whatever may be thought about the particular question then at issue, there can be no doubt that he was right to stress the need for caution in such matters. He did not, of course, deny the possibility of any Egyptian influence on Israelite literature or institutions, but he looked for convincing evidence before he would accept a particular example of such a theory. I entirely agree with him in that matter. As a token of respect for a friend of many years' standing, and for the value of his contribution to Semitic studies, I offer the following discussion of an argument advanced by a reputable Egyptologist for an Egyptian origin, not of a particular Hebrew passage, but of a genre of literature to which reference is made in the Hebrew Bible.

It is widely agreed that the books of Kings in the Old Testament contain much reliable information about the kings of Judah and Israel, their doings, and the events of their times; and such information can often be checked against external sources. A useful collection of such evidence is collected, for example, in a recent book by K.A. Kitchen, in which chapter 4 brings together evidence relevant to the books of Kings, and a convenient summary is given at the end (Kitchen 2003: 156–8). Many scholars would, indeed, be less conservative than Kitchen about the reliability of some of the material in the books of Kings, but it cannot reasonably be denied that much that is recorded in Kings is well attested by external evidence, such as some events, the names of Assyrian and other non-Israelite kings, and the names of some kings of Judah and Israel. The author, or authors, of 1 and 2 Kings must have had access to some reliable sources of information, which can scarcely all be attributed to purely oral tradition.

Various theories have been advanced concerning the sources on which the author of the books of Kings drew. One of the relevant passages for which a source must be postulated is 1 Kings 14.25–7. It tells how, in the fifth year of Rehoboam's reign,

    Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem; and he took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house;
he took away everything; and he took away all the shields of gold which Solomon had made. And King Rehoboam made in their stead shields of bronze, and committed them to the hands of the officers of the guard, who kept the door of the king’s house.

Shishak (a variant reading Shushak is found in 1 Kings 14.25) was the ruler who founded the Egyptian Twenty-Second Dynasty. The Egyptian form of his name is Sheshonq (so, for example, Redford 1992: 312), or perhaps Shoshenq (Kitchen 2003: 33). He ruled Egypt c. 945–24 B.C.; and the fifth year of Rehoboam’s reign was about 926–5 (Kitchen 2003: 32–3). There is Egyptian evidence for his campaign in Palestine, though it does not refer to Jerusalem (Mazar 1957: 57–66 = 1986: 139–50). Redford (1992: 323) thinks that the source of the biblical reference was ‘the dedication text written or incised on a vessel’. He adds (1992: 323, 327) that

Such vessels (or related paraphernalia of precious substance) were usually kept from generation to generation, and could easily have been viewed decades or centuries after their manufacture. Even if the objects themselves were not on view, the ‘checklist’ of cultic objects dedicated by a particular king (and even a checklist of objects removed!) is attested archaeologically in comparable contexts. Thus it is safe to conclude that building inscriptions and votive dedications, both on view on the temple mount, could have provided the ultimate source for all the Jerusalem temple notices.

Similarly, Redford (1992: 329) writes of ‘a visitor entering the precincts of the Jerusalem temple and adjacent royal apartments’ who ‘would have been confronted by a considerable amount of commemorative epigraphy and relief decoration’.

This theory is difficult to reconcile with Redford’s apparent belief that the books of Kings were compiled during the exile. He says (1992: 320) that the author of Kings ‘knows of . . . the Exile’. On the same page he says that the stories of the ‘Tales of the Prophets’, which he regards as one of the sources of Kings, ‘may reflect the view from the sixth century B.C. or even later’. Nowhere does Redford indicate that he accepts the widely-held hypothesis that there was a first edition of the books of Kings before the exile. If there was no pre-exilic edition, and if the work was first compiled after the events narrated in 2 Kings 25.9, 13–17 (cp. Ps. 74.2–7; Lam. 2.6–7), a visitor to the temple would have been confronted by ruins, and it may be doubted whether much would have survived of the ‘commemorative epigraphy’ that Redford postulates. Perhaps that is why a footnote on p. 327 states that ‘Of course both sources