1. Timescale

The narratives of 1–2 Kings ostensibly begin with the transfer of throne and power in Israel from the dying David to his young son Solomon, likeliest at ca. 970 BCE in modern reckoning, and they end with the fall of Judean Jerusalem in ca. 586 BCE, with a supplementary note on Jehoiachin’s release from prison following the accession of Awil-Marduk in Babylon, in 562 BCE. However, the beginning date is actually somewhat earlier, as 1 Kgs 11:14–22 records retrospectively the fortunes of Hadad (III), eventual ruler of Edom, exiled as a child in Egypt at least 20 years before David’s death, probably around 990 BCE or so.¹ So, we have a time span of ca. 1000–560 BCE overall.

In terms of Egyptian history, this period runs from the middle of the 21st Dynasty (ca. 1070–945 BCE) to the middle of the 26th (664–525 BCE), i.e. through most of Egypt’s pre-Hellenistic Late Period, and more specifically through most of her Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1070–664) and the beginning of the Saito-Persian epoch (664–332). During the whole of this long period, the centre of power in Egypt was up in the north: at the largely permanent capital Memphis with subordinate dynastic centres in the Delta.

2. Limited Extent and Nature of Egyptian Textual Sources, CA. 1070–560 BCE

2.1. The North

The key fact is that almost all political power in Egypt was based in Memphis and the north during this epoch, with Thebes and the south

being increasingly a provincial backwater. This situation has serious repercussions on the availability and nature of Egyptian sources both for Egypt’s own internal history and (even more drastically) for her relations with Western Asia and beyond. In this situation, formal historical inscriptions about campaigns abroad (if any!) or treaties with Near-Eastern states would have been set up on stelae or engraved on temple walls in Memphis or Tanis, the main Egyptian political centres during 1070–650 BCE. In the north, the main constructional material for temples and many stelae was limestone – not sandstone (as in Thebes), because limestone was closer at hand in the Memphis area. Unfortunately, the wholesale destruction of temples large and small at Memphis, to reuse the stone for building late-antique and medieval Cairo has (in most cases) removed everything except the baseline footings of such buildings. In the totally alluvial Delta, successive builders and rebuilders recycled existing imported stone repeatedly, often destroying older texts and scenes. And, down to modern times, vast amounts of limestone remains have been burnt into lime, to use in agriculture, with immense destruction of texts and scenes on blocks, stelae and statuary. That is why we find almost no mention of ancient Israel (or ancient anybody else!) from northern Egypt for the whole of this period. In the damp environment of the Delta, and also in Memphis proper, almost nothing survives of the former mass of contemporary papyrus records, except for strays preserved in desert-edge tombs adjoining Memphis, as at Saqqara.

To give positive examples,² the northern inscriptions of the 21st Dynasty consist of a few fragments under Psusennes I at Tanis, religious materials from his tomb and that of Amenemope at Tanis, then doorways of Siamun from a small temple at Memphis, a private stele (of his Year 16) from opposite Memphis, and his triumph-scene against foreigners from Tanis (its only surviving text being his name). This last fragment is almost our sole Egyptian evidence (to the present time) for the foreign relations of the 21st Dynasty with anybody at all – let alone early Israel. Of papyri, only the curious Moscow Literary Letter 127 has just brief mention of “those of Seir” (i.e., the Edomites) in probably the about the late 11th c. BCE.³

² For details, see Kitchen, The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt.