



**Bible-study: 2020/08/16 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Genesis 45:1-15**

Last week's passage and today's – two halves of a whole – and all the verses that lie between but were excised by the Lectioneers for the sake for expediency – the story of Jacob's *twelve* sons, provide the neat and tidy explanation for how it is that God's people, promised the good life *in Canaan*, wound up enslaved *in Egypt*. Indeed, the story we just heard has been called 'a literary device'; an *invention* 'to make a narrative linkage.'<sup>1</sup> And, having conjured such a notion, some have, mischievously, questioned whether the Early/Middle- Bronze Age tent-dwelling, nomadic, "happy-go-lucky" goat-herding patriarchs really had any connection at all to the militaristic "Hebrew" tribes who invaded from Africa, and seized and enjoyed the Iron Age Levantine hill-cities. A tale told for the purposes of 'religious propaganda' to justify conquest by rapacious outsiders;<sup>2</sup> to "prove," that is, a spurious, *bogus* claim on the land of 'milk and honey': [Ex. 3:8,17, 13:5, 33:3; Lev. 20:24, etc.]. Indeed, author Pekka Pitkänen – in a *very* recent book for Taylor & Francis, a *major* academic publishing-house – posits that the *entire* story about Abraham and his immediate descendants was perhaps created to justify the Hebrew's seizure and colonization of Canaan.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most famous proponent of something like this view – who'd assert it unequivocally – is the Canadian poet Margaret Atwood, novelist of the now notorious – thanks to a popular Hulu television series – *The Handmaid's Tale*. She wrote the foreword to a feminist textbook of "history" in which the following was claimed: 'The Biblical tales of the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph – are not historical [but rather] fictional romance... The editors' agenda was to teach patriarchy, asserting an ancient bond... Like the claims of divine connection made by state-forming leaders in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Peru, and Mexico, these narratives state that, for thousands of years, the Hebrews were a coherent people worshipping Yahweh who guided their establishment of the divine order on earth. But... Scholars now believe that [these] stories were drawn from widely known Near Eastern legends *to provide the Hebrews with a past and with religious legitimacy*.'<sup>4</sup> This is really quite extraordinary. And all of it proposed without a single citation(!), never *actually* referencing any of the "scholars" whose work the paragraph supposedly paraphrased. *Later*, (in the textbook), Professor George Mendenhall

<sup>1</sup> Bruggemann, Walter (1982), *Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching – Volume I)*, Atlanta, G. A.: John Knox Press, 291.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, Earl (2012), *From the Bodies of the Gods Psychoactive Plants and the Cults of the Dead as Revealed in Pagan, Hebrew, Minoan and Christian Traditions*, Rochester, V. T.: Park Street Press, 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Migration and Colonialism in Late Second Millennium BCE Levant and Its Environs The Making of a New World* (2020), New York, N. Y.: Routledge, 219.

<sup>4</sup> French, Marilyn (2008), *From Eve to Dawn: A History of Women in the World: Volume I – From Prehistory to the First Millennium*, New York, N. Y.: The Feminist Press, 192-193.

is invoked, and we will need to examine his argument in a couple of weeks for another session, but, “spoiler alert!”, he ‘has been criticized for being overly speculative’.<sup>5</sup> An understatement, but not untrue.

Sadly, *direct* evidence for the events is lacking, yes: we’ve not any corroborative newspaper headlines, for example, that speak of Jacob, Joseph, etc. by name, nor their escapades – but then such a thing – journalism, *paper* – didn’t yet exist in 1877 B.C.<sup>6</sup> Yet maybe there have been, in fact, overlooked archaeological discoveries which would buttress the fundamentals of the events described. After all, as James Hoffmeier observes: We *know* that ‘Egypt was frequented by the peoples of the Levant, especially as a result of climatic problems that resulted in drought...from the end of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2109 B.C.) [onwards]’.<sup>7</sup>

And in Goshen – the north-eastern delta region, at Tell el-Dab'a or, “Avaris,” Austrian excavations found a ‘modest’ village established in the 1900s B.C., which ‘quickly’ ‘expanded to the south’ in a matter of decades. It was a population “explosion.” And, judging from what was uncovered – the pottery, and the weapons found in tombs, as well as the style of domestic architecture, the lead on the project, Manfred Bietack, concluded: ‘The archaeological and anthropological evidence indicates that the settlers were not Egyptians but people from nearby Canaan’.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly Joseph’s family was *very* large. Those he fetches down to himself in Egypt are described as ‘Jacob...[and] his [eleven] sons, and his sons’ sons with him, his daughters, and his sons’ daughters’.[Gen. 46:6b-7] About *fifty* names for these refugees altogether are listed in the text: [v.46:8f.]. Saint Stephen – the first martyr – describes ‘seventy-five in all’: [Acts. 7:14]. Could this account for the “quick,” sudden expansion that Manfred Bietrak suggests? (We shouldn’t forget too, that the patriarchs were slave-owners, and that the household was even larger than those it mentions. [See: Gen. 17:23,27, 24:35, 30:43, 32:5])

Our text, of course, does *not* exclude that others came too from Canaan, with Joseph’s brothers – that is, at about the same time; their neighbors, *pagans* – who left for the same reason that they did, which wasn’t for the purpose of family reunification. Oh no. Rather, we’re told that: ‘...all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because [a] famine became severe throughout the world.’ [Gen. 41:57.] *Obviously*, the author of *Genesis* – Moses (probably), employs hyperbole here for dramatic effect. [A]ll the world’ did not come to Egypt to escape widespread, *regional* food-shortages, but the point being explicitly made is that certainly more than just Jacob’s family had the idea to do so. And we find evidence of this also in Avaris – of snake and winged-

<sup>5</sup> Leuchter, Mark (2017), *The Levites and the Boundaries of Israelite Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 34, n.7.

<sup>6</sup> See: Steinmann, Andrew (2019), *Genesis (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries – New Series)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 407.

<sup>7</sup> *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (1996), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Bietak, Manfred (1996), *Avaris: The Capital of the Hyksos - Recent Excavations at Tell el-Dab'a*, London: British Museum Press, 5. See also: Bietak, Manfred (2018), ‘The Many Ethnicities in Avaris: Evidence from the Northern Borderland of Egypt’, in Budka, J. & Auenmüller, J. (Eds.), *From Microcosm to Macrocosm: Individual Households and Cities in Ancient Egypt and Nubia*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Sidestone Press, pp. 79-98; esp. 82 & 84-87.

bull idols in temples to Baal that God's (faithful) people never would have built themselves.<sup>9</sup>

Most tantalisingly of all, though, and significant – I can't help but feel, was this – quoting Bietak again: 'Finally, it should be noted that[,] belonging either to the earliest settlement, dating to the late 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, or to the next stratum above it, is a tomb composed of a nearly square superstructure with a chapel on the eastern side, in which we made a very interesting discovery. Within a robber's pit sunk into the chapel we found fragments of a colossal statue of limestone depicting an Asiatic dignitary with a mushroom-shaped coiffure holding a throwstick at his right shoulder. It was a seated statue, nearly twice life-size, of excellent quality. The hair was painted red while the colour of the skin was yellow, the traditional colour of Asiatics in Egyptian art.'<sup>10</sup> This man was, he tells us, an 'overseer'.<sup>11</sup> The "mayor." *Exactly* as Joseph was. *This* is the position; *the office* we find him in possession of at the opening of today's passage, though unmentioned: 'Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, ...the captain of the [royal] guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man...; [H]e made him *overseer* of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.' [Gen. 39:1f.]

Bietack, however, did not mean to, seemingly, *intentionally* verify *Genesis*; his use of the same noun as the N.R.S.V. about Joseph's role in Egypt was a coincidence – though an exciting one! And the reason he is put off equating his finds at Avaris with the narrative we're examining is, principally, a matter of a name. Specifically, in chapter forty-seven of *Genesis*, Joseph is commanded to install his family 'in the land of Rameses': [v.11], which is the very area he dug, but Rameses wasn't the pharaoh of Egypt until Egypt's 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty in the prosperous New Kingdom, about 1292 B.C. And that doesn't fit at all!<sup>12</sup>

David Rohl on the other hand, another Egyptologist – a British one this time, has no such hesitancy. He makes a bold proclamation on the basis of an additional intriguing observation: 'The body of the statue was painted as if wrapped in the full-length robe of the vizier. But it was a vizier's cloak of a very different kind – decorated in an elaborate pattern of reds, blues, blacks and whites to represent the woven 'coat-of-many-colours' of our story's hero.<sup>13</sup> Could this be true? Do we have *actual, hard* proof for Joseph? And most of us haven't heard anything of it? In 2014 a documentary about Avaris (and the Exodus) was made for popular audiences by the film-maker, Tim Mahoney; narrated by *Hercules*-actor, Kevin Sorbo.<sup>14</sup> What a coup this may be for the Church and her mission! Let's watch a few minutes: [Video clip: *Patterns of Evidence: Exodus, 25:43-32:20*].

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> 20.

<sup>11</sup> 26.

<sup>12</sup> The issue is an easy one to resolve: to the author – or editor – of *Genesis*, working later than the events described, *every* pharaoh was Rameses the way in England every vacuum-cleaner is a "Hoover." This is a problem only to those looking to cause problems.

<sup>13</sup> *From Eden to Exile: The Five-Thousand-Year History of the People of the Bible*, Lebanon, T. N.: Greenleaf Press, 160.

<sup>14</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patterns\\_of\\_Evidence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patterns_of_Evidence).