



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

August 2019 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Ancient Egyptian Thought in the Old Testament"

Lorna Oakes

At the beginning of August Lorna Oakes came to talk to us about the parallels between Ancient Egyptian literary sources and the Old Testament. In her lecture she covered several sorts of literature including myths, legends, hymns and prayers and prophecy.

Oakes started with myths, and began at the beginning with creation stories. She pointed out that these aren't "just stories", for the Ancient Egyptians (and the writers of the Old Testament) these were serious reflections on their origins. The Egyptians had several creation stories - even as early as the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom there were at least two variants with the god Atum bringing the gods Shu and Tefnut into being by sneezing or by using his semen. The closest variant to the Old Testament creation story is called the Memphite Theology and the text is known from a large granite slab dating to the 25th Dynasty which is now in the British Museum. In both the Old Testament and the Memphite Theology creation is accomplished by words - God in the Old Testament commands things to exist, and they do; Ptah in the Memphite Theology accomplishes all creation by his thoughts and words. Both myths end with the creator surveying their creation and seeing that it is good.

The next myth type Oakes talked about was the flood myth - many cultures have a myth of humankind being wiped out by a flood sent from the gods. But the Ancient Egyptians are different - they wouldn't use a flood metaphor for destruction because in their world view floods bring life and fertility to the land. Instead there is the story of the near destruction of the world by the goddess Sekhmet which fills the same niche. Oakes told us this story - it's set in a time when Re ruled mankind directly, but people start complaining that he's getting too old. So he decides to kill some of the people in order to stop the others complaining, and he orders Sekhmet to do it. But Sekhmet gets carried away and goes beyond what Re wanted her to do. And so he tricks her into drinking a great pool of blood coloured beer - when she wakes up from her drunken stupor she's forgotten what she was doing and forgotten her lust for blood so mankind is spared from total annihilation.

She now moved on to telling us about Old Testament legends that show similarities to Ancient Egyptian stories. There are several aspects of the Joseph cycle of stories in the Bible that have Ancient Egyptian counterparts. For instance the story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife - in this part of Joseph's story he's a slave in the household of an important Egyptian called Potiphar. Potiphar's wife takes a fancy to him and tries to seduce him, but he resists. In revenge for this rejection she makes it look like he tried to seduce her and so he's flung into jail. This parallels part of an Egyptian story called The

Tale of the Two Brothers. In this story two brothers live together, the younger one in the household as if his brother and brother's wife were his parents. The two brothers are out working in the fields one day and the younger brother is sent back to the house to get grain. When he gets there his brother's wife tries to seduce him, but he gets angry and rebukes her for such a disgraceful suggestion - after all, she is like a mother to him. And then he gets the grain and goes back to working in the fields, but says nothing to his brother about the incident. The wife is angry in turn at being spurned and decides to take revenge - she does this by making it look like she's been attacked. The older brother comes back to the house first at the end of the day and finds her lying on the floor in distress - she tells him a story about the younger brother trying to seduce her then beating her when she refused. So the older brother is angry in his turn, and goes out to lie in wait for his brother so that he can kill him for this outrage. But the younger brother is warned by the cows, and runs away rather than walk into the trap.

Oakes stressed that the similarities of these stories doesn't necessarily mean that they are copied directly from each other. She brought up the idea that there are only so many plot types in the world, and pointed out that this sort of attempted seduction/rejection/revenge trope is a common plot across many cultures and stories. But the closeness of these two in their details does suggest that the author(s) of the Old Testament Joseph stories had heard or read The Tale of the Two Brothers and then worked ideas into their own legend.

There are more similarities between Joseph's story and Ancient Egyptian thought. Dream interpretation is a common Ancient Egyptian motif which shows up in a key sequence in Joseph's story. While Joseph is in prison two other inmates have dreams and Joseph is able to interpret them. One, a butler, dreams of pressing grapes into a goblet which he takes to Pharaoh who drinks from it - Joseph says this means that he will be restored to favour and let out of jail, and this comes to pass. The other, a baker, dreams of carrying bread to give to Pharaoh but the birds keep eating it from the basket - Joseph says this means that he will be executed, and this too comes to pass. At first this demonstration of knowledge of dreams doesn't help Joseph, but when Pharaoh has disturbing dreams that no-one can interpret the butler remembers Joseph and he is summoned from the jail. Pharaoh has dreamt of 7 fat cows followed by 7 thin cows, and Joseph interprets this as 7 years of plenty and good harvests, followed by 7 years of famine and poor harvests. And so Joseph is released from prison and made Vizier, and his advice means that the country doesn't starve in the time of poor harvests. Oakes pointed out that the imagery in Pharaoh's dream tells us what's important to Pharaoh (and the culture of the time) - cattle, and good harvests.

Joseph's promotion to Vizier has some similarities to another Egyptian story - the Tale of Sinhue. At the end of Sinhue's story he returns to Egypt at Pharaoh's command and so that he can die on Egyptian soil. He's feted at the court, and given a house suitable for a Prince; the women of the court all give him the respect and courtesies due to a Prince. And he's subsequently buried in a fine tomb at the expense of the king. The imagery in this tale is like that of the raising of Joseph to be Vizier.

Returning to dream interpretation Oakes told us that it was a real part of Egyptian culture, not just a feature of their stories. A dream book was found at Deir el Medina which gives lists of things that might happen in a dream, and what interpretation should be placed on that event or object. She gave us several examples but the one that stuck in my head particularly was that dreaming of warm beer means that there will be suffering!

Oakes now moved from Joseph to Moses. His origin story - the finding of the babe in the bullrushes - has obvious resonances with stories from other cultures, but not Ancient Egyptian examples in this case. Instead parallels are found in the story of the birth of Sargon of Adad, and Romulus and Remus. But one part of his story that does show similarities to Ancient Egyptian thought is Moses' flight from Egypt after killing an Egyptian taskmaster. This is similar to the crucial moment of the Tale of Sinhue. Sinhue is on campaign with the future Senwosret I when news of the assassination of Amenemhat I is brought. Senwosret is told in secret and immediately returns to the capital. The news is then also passed on to the other princes, but Sinhue overhears one of these conversations and panics - he flees into exile where he spends many years in other countries. Oakes also compared the Burning Bush episode in Moses' story to Sinhue's decision to return home. In both cases the protagonist is summoned by his lord (either divine or semi-divine) to leave the life he's been living and return home to his people to take on a new role.

A third resonance is that the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea is reminiscent (in imagery rather than context!) of a story about Khufu being entertained. This tale is found on the Westcar Papyrus and tells of how Khufu was bored, and asked his court to suggest things he could do for entertainment. It's suggested that he would enjoy going out on a lake in a boat crewed by the most beautiful women of court, and they can go up and down while he watches these women rowing. He thinks this is a good idea, and so off they go for his afternoon's entertainment. While rowing the boat one of the girls loses a pendant and is distraught. Khufu offers to replace it for her, but she wants her own one back. So he calls the Lector Priest and tells him what happened - in a fairly repetitive fashion, Oakes read us some in translation which demonstrated how it used the same words and phrasing both times the loss of the pendant was described. The Lector Priest then used his magic to return the pendant - he folded back the water on one side of the lake to pile up on the other side, at which point the pendant could be seen on the lake bed and it was returned to the girl who'd lost it. The authors of the Moses story clearly liked the imagery as a way of demonstrating great power, because it's reused when God parts the Red Sea for the Israelites to pass.

Oakes now moved on to the Psalms (credited to David in the Old Testament) which have similarities to hymns and prayers found in an Ancient Egyptian context. The closest parallels are with texts devoted to Aten worship and there are phrases in both hymns to the Aten and Old Testament Psalms that are identical. She talked us through Psalm 104 and its similarities to the Great Hymn to the Aten. There are also similarities between the Psalms and non-Aten hymns. Insight into the Egyptian conceptions of god(s) come from texts found at Deir el Medina - such as a hymn praising Amun which asks for healing for a man who is ill because of the sins he has committed. Oakes was again keen to stress that these similarities don't come about because of direct copying of texts from one tradition to another, instead it shows how the poets and authors were part of the same common intellectual background.

Prophetic texts are also similar between Ancient Egyptian sources and the Old Testament. An Egyptian example is a text purporting to tell of prophecies made in the 6th Dynasty. These prophecies talk about foreigners who will in future come into Egypt and cause problems during what is identifiable as the Middle Kingdom. It was actually written during the reign of Amenemhat I and is a piece of pseudo-prophecy that's actually kingly propaganda. Oakes compared this with the story of Daniel and

Nebuchadnezzar, which is also claiming to be a prophetic text which foretells future problems (for Nebuchadnezzar in this case) but is actually later propaganda.

The last genre of literature that Oakes discussed was Wisdom literature - these Ancient Egyptian texts are usually a father telling his son how to get on in the world. The biblical Book of Proverbs is of a similar genre. Solomon is said to be the author of these (although he probably wasn't) - stories about his wisdom include the famous one about dividing a baby. In this two women both claim the same baby as their child (the other child has died). So Solomon suggests chopping the baby in half and giving them half each as a fair solution - at this point he can identify the real mother because she is the most horrified and offers to give the baby away in order to save its life. Taken as a whole the Proverbs show the same shared intellectual heritage with Ancient Egyptian literature as is the case with the other texts Oakes discussed - there are many similarities in both content and form between the texts from the two cultures. Another indication of the shared heritage comes from a reference in the Book of Ecclesiastes to the Satire of the Trades - this is the piece of Egyptian literature which was often used in training scribes and Oakes positioned it as a sort of send-up of the Wisdom literature tradition. It's the one where several professions are listed with the downsides of each one given in exhaustive detail, except for being a scribe which is nothing but good and so therefore it's a good idea for boys to devote themselves to learning their letters well.

This was an entertaining and informative talk. I'm not sure I've done justice to this talk in my write-up. A lot of the content was Lorna Oakes telling us the stories that she was discussing - either in her own words or by reading us parts of translations from the original Egyptian. My attempts to summarise have probably made it sound much drier than it actually was!