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## THE BIBLICAL DELUGE AND THE INUNDATION BY THE NILE

### I

SOME of our readers will, I hope, remember that, in my contribution on "The Turn of the Tide in Pentateuchal Criticism" in the January issue of 1930, I made mention with particular appraisal of the interesting book written by Professor Yahuda from Heidelberg on the subject of Egyptian influence upon the language of the Pentateuch.<sup>1</sup>

Now this valuation does not mean unconditional agreement. On the contrary, however much I find to praise in his book, I am convinced it has to be subjected to an exact and severe criticism.

Let me explain with a few words in what respect I can agree with Yahuda, and in what respect I find fault with him.

I agree with him in so far, that the language of the Pentateuch really bears witness to a considerable influence of Egyptian phraseology. There are several places from the Pentateuch, hitherto hardly explainable, whereon the Egyptian parallels throw a fresh and sufficient light. This is the case with the utterly difficult phrase *וְעַל-פִּי יִשָּׂא קִלְעִי* (Genesis xli. 40). The Authorized Version has translated: "according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled"; but this is certainly not the meaning of the Hebrew. The Revised Version in margin has: "order themselves" or "do homage"; and this neither agrees with the Hebrew, which literally has to be rendered as "to thy mouth all my people shall kiss". But what is the meaning of this enigmatical expression? The Egyptian idiom gives the solution: "to eat" by the Egyptians metaphorically is rendered as "to kiss the food". This Egyptian saying literally has been translated by the author of Joseph's history in the Pentateuch, and now the meaning is clear: the Pharaoh declares that the food supply of all his people will be arranged exclusively by the measures and prescriptions of Joseph.

Another example of similar tendency is to be found in the word *וְהָיָה*, a *hapax*, used by the Egyptian midwives from the Hebrew women (Exodus i. 19), of which a sufficient explanation

<sup>1</sup> *Die Sprache des Pentateuch in ihren Beziehungen zum Aegyptischen, Erstes Buch*, Berlin u. Leipzig, 1929.

until now has not been given. Authorized and Revised Versions both have "lively", but one cannot quite understand why the Hebrew women should be called thus. Yahuda, however, invokes the assistance of the Egyptian equivalent, which is used to denote, in a somewhat disdainful sense, small cattle: sheep and goat. Now it is a peculiarity of these domestic animals that the dropping of the young passes extraordinarily quickly; and what do the Egyptian midwives mean to say to their sovereign? "The Hebrew women are she-goats", it is said with some disdain, in order not to arouse the suspicion of the Pharaoh, and in the meantime to give a plausible reason for their not obeying his cruel commandment.

A third instance is the name of the Jewish unleavened bread, the *mazzoth*. According to Yahuda this is an Egyptian word and indicates a species of bread or cake prepared from unleavened dough and baked in the burning sun. These Egyptian loaves are still known to-day as "bread of the poor" (*cf.* Deuteronomy xvi. 3).

It cannot be denied that such data present a considerable probability, that the Pentateuch, or at least the bulk of the material embedded in the Pentateuch, must have been written by a person who was extremely well acquainted with Egyptian language and customs, and that he must have had sufficient reason to suppose a similar acquaintance with those in behalf of whom he wrote. That is to say, the Pentateuch, or at any rate the bulk of the material embedded in it, cannot have originated at the time wherein Pentateuchal criticism is wont to place it, but must have been written about the time it refers to itself.

On the other hand I differ from Yahuda as he takes his scope too wide. He proves too much and therefore too little, as he appeals to a number of ordinary Hebrew words to point out the Egyptian influence on the Pentateuch; words like *shamayim* ("heavens"), *sar* ("prince" or "chief"), *chayab* ("living creature" or "beast"), *geshem* ("rain"). These words are found in the whole Old Testament, and if they should really prove what Yahuda supposes, the whole Old Testament ought to have originated in Egypt, *quod absurdum*. The same is to be said with regard to expressions as "knowledge of good and evil" and "even unto this day".

In other cases, also, a sound criticism shows that Yahuda has drawn his conclusions too hastily. I choose two instances.

The first is this : the Hebrew word *adon* (" lord ") in the plural number used for man (Genesis xl. 1 ; xlii. 29, 33 ; xlv. 8) is interpreted by Yahuda as a sign of Egyptian influence : the Pharaoh in Egypt is addressed as " lord " in the dual number, because he is the sovereign of the two parts of Egypt, Lower and Upper Egypt. The plural number in the cited texts from Genesis has to be understood properly as a dual, and so this demonstrates the Egyptian influence on the speech of the Pentateuch, in the opinion of Yahuda. But this scholar has overlooked the fact that there are other places outside the Pentateuch where the plural number of *adon* is used for man, and no Egyptian usage can be adduced to explain this : Isaiah xix. 4 prophesies that Egypt will receive a cruel lord ; and 1 Kings xvi. 24 Shemer is called the " lord " of the hill Samaria. It is clear this is a simple plural of intensity, so common in Hebrew, and the same explanation will go in the cases of Genesis xl. 1 ; xlii. 29, 33 and xlv. 8. The second instance has to do with the expression **אֲשֶׁר עַל הַבַּיִת**, according to the English Version " the steward of his house ", Genesis xliii. 16 ; xlv. 1, 4. Yahuda considers this a specific Egyptian manner to express the quality of an office-bearer. He refers to other similar titles as " captain " and " superintendent " in the Egyptian language. But the title **אֲשֶׁר עַל הַבַּיִת** surely is genuine Hebraic ; it is used also, 1 Kings xvi. 9 ; xviii. 3 ; 2 Kings xviii. 18, 37 ; Isaiah xxxvi. 3, 22 ; 2 Kings xix. 2 ; Isaiah xxxvii. 2 ; xxii. 15 ; in all these places with addition of the personal name of the office-bearer. A kindred title is **אֲשֶׁר עַל הַמַּס**, 1 Kings xii. 18 " who was over the tribute " or " over the levy " (as the Revised Version has), also with his personal name. Without the personal name we find **אֲשֶׁר עַל הַבַּיִת** in 2 Kings x. 5 ; **אֲשֶׁר עַל הָעִיר** " the commander of the town " all the same in 2 Kings x. 5 ; and **אֲשֶׁר עַל הַמְּלִיחָה** " the chief of the royal vestry " in 2 Kings x. 22. So it is premature to infer Egyptian influence from the title in Genesis xliii. 16, etc.

## II

A next and much more serious objection against the expositions of Yahuda is, that he frankly speaks of the " myths " and " legends " of the book of Genesis. However he may show himself a powerful antagonist of the Pentateuchal criticism, it

is not a difference in principle which brings him into conflict with the adherents of the documentary hypothesis. However he may deal many a heavy blow upon the critics who consider the first chapters of the first book of the Bible a collection of Babylonian narratives, it is not an essential divergence which makes him their opponent. These chapters contain for him as well as for them no revelation of divine truth, but merely human ideas: mythical conceptions originated from heathen sources. But as Old Testament scholarship commonly derives these conceptions from Babylon, Yahuda searches for their origin in Egypt. Rather he does not even contest the ultimate Babylonian origin; the material must have come from Mesopotamia, but the form in which this material is presented to us is Egyptian. And the Egyptian influence has been so fundamental that not only widespread vestiges of Egyptian language and phraseology are to be observed but also extensive marks of Egyptian thought and notion. It is for this reason that I must take my position against Yahuda as well as against the defenders of the Babylonian character of the Biblical narrative in the first chapters of Genesis. For us who believe in the Bible as the holy Word of God, the Revelation of divine truth, it is impossible to accept the qualification "myths" and "legends", whether they are called originally Babylonian or Egyptian—the whole Bible, and therefore also the first chapters of Genesis, originate from the Lord Himself, and not from Babel or Egypt.

To lay stress on this essential difference between us and Yahuda does, however, not relieve us from our scientific duty to test the arguments he has adduced in proof of the Egyptian origin of the separate messages, implied in the successive chapters of the first part of Genesis. We do not intend to do this now for all these; as the title of this paper shows we wish to restrict ourselves to a few remarks regarding the Biblical flood-narrative and the Egyptian model thereof which Yahuda supposes to have been the yearly rise and fall of the Nile.

I wish but slightly to touch upon a series of details by which Yahuda tries to convince us of the Egyptian origin of the deluge story.

So the name of Noah's ark: **תֵּבָה**. He surely with right argues that this Egyptian name delivers sufficient proof that the Biblical narrative in its present form cannot be Babylonian; if it were Babylonian, of course one of the Accadian names for

the ship of the flood-hero would have been employed. Nevertheless the word **תִּבְיָה** does not establish the Egyptian origin of the narrative; the Biblical author may have borrowed the Egyptian word because it served him suitably to describe the character of the ship: a huge vessel, particularly apt to sail on the high seas and to carry a great cargo, as the Egyptian *dp.t* indicates.

So likewise the word **קָנִים**, Genesis vi. 14, commonly understood as "rooms", wherein Yahuda surmises the Egyptian name for the fibres of the papyrus; a significance which must be judged at least problematical.

Further, the *hapax*, **צֹהַר**, Genesis vi. 16, a stumbling-block for all commentators. Is it "light" or "roof"? Yahuda has recourse to the characteristic Egyptian interstice, which is to be found near to the roof, in order to admit light, when for the rest doors and windows have been shut. In my opinion the Hebrew as it runs now opposes this interpretation, for the words "and to a cubit shalt thou finish it from above" (this is the exact translation) cannot denote the dimension of the interstice as Yahuda imagines; I understand this phrase from an open space between the roof and the upper-side of the side-walls; so the **צֹהַר** is the "roof", which significance is corroborated by the Canaanian word *zuchru* in the Amarna-letters, with the sense "back" or "ridge". Now the "back" or "ridge" of a ship is its "roof" or "deck".

Next to this we are called to pay attention to the verb **מָחָה** for the destroying by the deluge, Genesis vi. 7; vii. 4, 23; literally the meaning of this verb is "to blot out". Now in an Egyptian text there is a verb "to blot out" employed from an extermination of all living creatures by an inundation. But this has nothing to do with the Hebrew **מָחָה**; the Egyptian properly indicates "to scratch out" what has been written, and the Hebrew rather is "to wipe out", used of a dish, *cf.* 2 Kings xxi. 13.

Moreover, both in Hebrew and in the Egyptian language the same word is used to denote the "rainbow" and the "bow" as a weapon. Now here is no etymological dependence, for the Hebrew **קֶשֶׁת** and the Egyptian *pd.t* are totally different words. And the simple fact that in both languages the idea "bow" is applied to the rainbow is no sufficient proof that Egypt has exerted any influence on the Hebrew: the designation of weapon

and rainbow with one and the same word is so natural and intelligible, regarding the resemblance in form, that we need not be astonished by this concurrence: it surely may be due to parallel development.

Lastly there are a few words to say with respect to the "seasons", as they are described in Genesis viii. 22: "seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter". According to Yahuda we have to regard these six words as three pairs of synonyms, by which the year is merely divided into two parts. The second pair, he thinks, refers to Egypt, where summer and winter are discriminated not as the dry and the wet time, but as the hot and the cool time. Now, if this was quite right, it would not be a proof to Egyptian origin, as Yahuda himself readily grants, it would merely show that the Biblical author has had Egypt in mind. But I am not so easily convinced that Yahuda's grouping is just, as little as any other grouping; and for this reason: next to the three above-named pairs of words we also find "day and night". I think it is useless to look for any special grouping; the whole series has the purpose to point out in general that the normal alternation in nature will take place with undisturbed regularity. The best that I have read on this subject in any commentary is what the German critic Holzinger says: "es soll einfach durch Hervorhebung der verschiedenen Gegensätze des Naturlaufs versichert werden, dass die Ordnung des Weltlaufs keiner Störung mehr ausgesetzt werden soll wie die Flut eine gewesen ist."<sup>1</sup>

### III

The most interesting part of Yahuda's expositions on the subject of the flood is his comparison of the data from the Biblical narrative with those of the yearly inundation by the Nile. Here he thinks himself able to prove such a striking coincidence, that it is impossible to deny the transformation of the flood story according to the data of the Nile-movement.

He points out that the earliest date for the beginning of the rise of the river (that is to say for the Egyptian Nile, from the first cataract near Assuan to the Mediterranean) is  $\pm$  5th of May, and the latest date for the maximal height of the water-level is  $\pm$  1st or 2nd of October. Till about the beginning of

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis erklärt*, Freiburg i. B., Leipzig u. Tübingen, 1898, p. 83.

November the water remains at this level, and gradually flows back till the end of December. In January, as an Egyptian papyrus says, "the earth is out again"; the river then has turned back into its normal bed. Even thereafter the height of the water is perpetually diminishing, until the lowest level has been reached and the rise of the water begins anew. In the first time after the river has returned into its normal bed, the earth at the surface still remains muddy, until the seed has grown up; only then complete dryness makes its appearance. These phenomena and data according to Yahuda are underlying the Biblical description of the deluge.

He reminds us of the following points :

(1) The flood lasts a full year (more exactly, a year and ten days, from the seventeenth day of the second month of Noah's six hundredth year, Genesis vii. 11, until the twenty-seventh day of the second month of the following year, Genesis viii. 14)—just as long, in his opinion, as the movement of the Nile.

(2) The waters of the flood remained at their highest level during 150 days (Genesis vii. 24), and only after this space of time had elapsed they commenced to diminish (Genesis viii. 3)—exactly the time between the beginning of the rise of the river ( $\pm$  5th of May) and the maximal height of the water-level ( $\pm$  1st or 2nd of October).

(3) The retrogression of the flood is completed in stages: on the first day of the tenth month the mountain-tops became visible (Genesis viii. 5); on the first day of the first month of the next year all the water had vanished (Genesis viii. 13); and on the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was dried (Genesis viii. 14)—precisely like with the Nile: the water decreases from its maximal height until the river has returned into its bed and the earth has become visible, but yet muddy; and later on the soil is dried.

(4) The beginning of the flood is located in the same time of the year as the beginning of the Nile's rise, in the second month of spring.

What shall we say to all this ?

To begin with, that there is a certain similarity between the deluge and the inundation by the Nile, nobody should deny. Every inundation, of larger or smaller extent, will have some traits in common. It surely will happen whenever any smaller or larger portion of land is inundated, that the decrease of the



water will take place by stages : at a certain moment the water will have risen to its summit, then the retrogression commences, and after longer or shorter time the earth will become visible again, at first moist and muddy, and again after some time it wholly will have been dried. Such will be the course of things wherever and whenever any river has overflowed its banks. So it is nothing uncommon when we notice this general accordance between the Biblical account of the deluge and the movement of the Nile.

As to the particulars, at first we throw a glance at the duration of the flood. Can this be compared with the movement of the Nile ? I must call the reader's attention to the fact, that the term of a year for the movement of the Nile can only be secured by including the whole period during which this river flows normally through its bed, and therefore the figures do not balance : the duration of the flood is reckoned from the moment the waters began to rise till the earth was dried ; to reach the term of a year for the inundation by the Nile it is necessary to count in the period after the land is dried until the rise commences anew. So that does not square.

Secondly, Yahuda compares the 150 days during which the flood stood over the earth with the whole period wherein the Nile rises to its highest level. Again, these two do not tally. To make the comparison equal, one ought to include for the deluge the forty days during which the waters mounted (Genesis vii. 12).

Thirdly, the beginning of the flood is dated in the second month of the spring ; exactly the time the Nile begins to rise. This, however, can surely not be regarded as an evidence of Egyptian influence on the Biblical narrative. It merely can be adduced as such, if one is not willing to take into account the fact that the deluge was a divine punishment upon sinful humanity ; Yahuda seems to look upon the Biblical deluge merely as a natural disaster.

Now I hitherto neglected the fact that the duration of the flood in the Bible is fixed at a full year *and ten days*. It is necessary to take this into account now. I pointed out above that even if we start from the term of a year the figures do not balance ; this is so much the more the case if we lay full stress on the fact that the deluge lasted ten days longer. Yahuda sees in these ten days a confirmation of his opinion : he regards

them as so-called *epagomenes*, and infers therefrom that the Biblical author must have been acquainted with the Egyptian custom of adding five *epagomenes* at the close of the year. It is rather awkward that the Biblical author should have made use of *ten* *epagomenes* instead of five; if he had undergone the Egyptian influence to such a degree as Yahuda supposes, why did he not altogether follow the Egyptian calendar? But is it possible to regard these ten days as *epagomenes*? According to the Biblical text the reckoning runs like this: within seven days after the divine command had reached Noah to enter the ark the rain began to pour down and the fountains of the great deep were broken up: that was in the six hundredth year of his life, on the seventeenth day of the second month (Genesis vii. 11); and Noah left the ark because the earth was dried in his six hundred and first year, on the twenty-seventh day of the second month (Genesis viii. 14 sqq.). Now it is lucid, that a *full* year had passed away—quite the same whether this year has to be regarded as a solar or a lunar year, or even a luni-solar year with a certain number of *epagomenes*; with the indication in Genesis viii. 14 we find ourselves at any rate in the *next* year, of which then already ten days have passed away. So it is in flat contradiction of the Biblical text to regard these ten days as *epagomenes*. I cannot see it otherwise: Yahuda wants the *epagomenes* to adjust the duration of the deluge, which is ten days too long, to the movement of the Nile which, in his opinion, precisely fills a year.

Finally, there is yet another point to be discussed. Everybody knows how the height of the waters of the flood is described in Genesis vii. 20: "fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered". Now these fifteen cubits find their parallel with the inundation of the Nile, Yahuda teaches us. Down from the hoary antiquity until now the difference between the highest and lowest level of the Nile amounts to fifteen cubits and a fraction. Old tide-gauges have been found amounting to no more than sixteen cubits, and still nowadays fifteen and two-thirds cubits is considered the favourable height for the rise of the river, in order to effect a sufficient irrigation of the whole agricultural territory. This, however, is nothing more than an utterly external and accidental congruity of the figure *fifteen*. It is quite a different thing, that the whole difference between the highest and lowest water-level of the Nile amounts to fifteen cubits, and that the waters of the deluge

rose to fifteen cubits *over the mountain-tops*! It is not very difficult to construct parallels in this way, but scientific value cannot be attributed to them.

Concluding, I venture to say that the attempt of Yahuda to compare the Biblical deluge with the inundation by the Nile must be regarded as a failure. It is impossible to derive therefrom a sound argument for the Egyptian origin of the flood-narrative.

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