

CHAPTER 17

Egypt

WITH Egypt, we come to the first of the major powers which conflicted with ancient Israel. An internally strong and determined Egypt was always more than a match for its much smaller neighbours in Palestine. If anything, it is surprising that Egypt played such a small part in the history of the monarchies of Israel and Judah; for Egypt was geographically much closer to the Hebrew states than were Assyria and Babylon, and by long tradition considered Palestine as rightfully part of Egyptian domains.

An Egyptian priest Manetho in the third century B.C. wrote a history of his country in which he provided a useful framework, still utilized today, of a list of the royal dynasties. The dynasties, down to the conquest of Alexander the Great, numbered thirty-one, and can be traced in considerable detail back to the king of upper Egypt, Narmer by name, who in *c.* 2850 B.C. conquered the Delta region, thus uniting Egypt, and established its first dynasty. The period of the Old Kingdom (Dynasties III-VI, *c.* 2650-2200 B.C.) was the pyramid age, when the culture and civilization of Egypt reached a peak of attainment — and this before ever Abraham took his journey by stages from Mesopotamia to the Promised Land.

The third millennium ended with a period of internal disorder for Egypt, brought about by a measure of economic discontent among the lower classes and by the desire for power on the part of the aristocracy. Egypt's internal weakness permitted numerous Asiatics, semi-nomads and others, to infiltrate the Delta region. The land-bridge from the Delta into Palestine, though passing through an arid region, was a permanent weak spot in Egypt's defences, and at different times throughout their history the Egyptian kings built protective walls or embarked on military expeditions which had a defensive purpose.

At last two Theban families (Dynasties XI and XII) succeeded in bringing order out of chaos, reuniting the country, and inaugurating the Middle Kingdom, which lasted from the twenty-first to the eighteenth centuries B.C. This was another period of prosperity and great cultural attainment, at a time when in Palestine the patriarchs of Israel were roaming with their flocks and herds. The more settled Canaanite population of Palestine, on the other hand, was considerably influenced by the impressive culture of Egypt, and probably to some extent politically dominated by the Egyptian kings.

The Execration Texts¹ of the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries give us an interesting picture of Egyptian political fears. The kings, for all their competence and achievements, saw reason to fear potential enemies on every side — local rulers in Canaan, Nubia and Lybia, as well as ambitious noblemen in Egypt itself. Accordingly, they took religious steps to ward off the dangers; set in magical formulae, the names of such foes were inscribed on bowls and figurines which were then ritually smashed, in order to bring confusion and calamity to these enemies. One such text is content to name hostile forces in general: “Every evil word, every evil speech, every evil slander, every evil thought, every evil plot, every evil fight, every evil quarrel, every evil plan, every evil thing, all evil dreams, and all evil slumber”. Many other texts, however, are much more specific; and among the names from Canaan which were thus execrated there appears one of the first references in history to the name of Jerusalem. Its rulers Yaqar-‘Ammu and Setj-‘Anu were both consigned to oblivion in the fashion we have described.

That the fears were by no means groundless is clear from the sequel; internal disorders broke out afresh, permitting a fresh wave of Asiatic migration into Lower Egypt, and the upshot was that northern Egypt found itself ruled by foreigners from *c.* 1720 till *c.* 1570 B.C. (They permitted a puppet kingdom at Thebes; their own capital was in the Delta region.) These Asiatics have long been known as the “Hyksos” kings, a name which derives from an Egyptian phrase meaning “rulers of foreign countries” (none too explicit a designation!). Whatever their precise origins, it is of interest that one of their kings was called “Simeon”, another “Jacob-har”, and it can only be concluded that they bore some sort of relationship, not necessarily very close, to the ancestors of Israel. It is widely supposed that it was one of the Hyksos kings whose minister Joseph became; certainly they looked with favour upon Semites like themselves, whereas the Egyptians had no love for Asiatics, and once the Hyksos were driven out tried to eradicate every vestige of their period of rule.

1. Cf. *ANET*, pp. 328ff.

The New Kingdom (Dynasties XVIII-XX) began for Egypt when a native Theban king named Ka-mose decided that the time had come to expel the foreigners, and he and his successor Ah-mose I in a succession of campaigns drove the Asiatics back into Palestine. The experience of subjection to foreign domination had turned the Egyptians into nationalists and imperialists, and once their own realm was consolidated, the Eighteenth Dynasty kings embarked on the conquest of Palestine and south Syria. The victory which gave Egypt the control it sought was achieved by the very able Tuth-mose III in a battle at Megiddo in 1468 B.C.; against him were ranged no fewer than 330 local kings, a figure which testifies to the degree of political fragmentation of Syria-Palestine at the time.

Thus the New Kingdom is the period also known as the Egyptian Empire. Syria-Palestine was organized as an Egyptian dominion, its petty kings becoming mere vassals of Tuth-mose and his successors. Egyptian military bases were set up at strategic points, and an active trade was fostered, which brought as much Asiatic influence into Egypt as it did Egyptian influence into western Asia. Many Semitic words and Canaanite deities (i.e. Baal and Anat) found their way into Egypt.

In the fourteenth century the residents of Syria-Palestine grew restive, though they expended their energies in local conflicts rather than in attacking the Egyptians. The Amarna Letters² give an interesting picture of the situation. These documents have survived from the Egyptian record office of the first half of the fourteenth century, and consist of letters written (in Akkadian) to the Egyptian king by various petty kings in Syria-Palestine, together with copies of some of his rescripts. Once again, the name of Jerusalem occurs; its king (by name 'Abdu-Kheba) was one of the Palestinian rulers who begged for Egyptian aid against his local enemies. But this help was not forth-coming; for one reason or another the Egyptian king declined to despatch troops to the trouble-spots. The king in question was Amen-hotep IV, a man who sought to bring about a social and political revolution in Egypt. Royal power was being challenged from several directions, notably the army, the civil service and the powerful Amun priesthood, and in his endeavours to remedy this situation Amen-hotep moved his capital from Thebes (where the Amun priesthood was well entrenched) to a new city, which he called Akhet-aton in honour of Aton, the deity whose worship he sought to make supreme in Egypt. At the same time and for the same reason he changed his own name to Akh-en-aton. It was in the ruins of this city (abandoned soon after his reign ended), near a place now called el-Amarna, that the Amarna tablets were discovered. It is clear that Akh-en-aton was no weakling, but

2. *ANET*, pp. 482-490; *AOTS*, pp. 3-15.

nevertheless his revolution was ill-fated and in his efforts to sustain its impetus in Egypt he allowed events in Syria-Palestine to get out of hand. (He, rather than any Hyksos king, may have been the Pharaoh in whose reign Joseph came to Egypt and rose to prominence.)

The Eighteenth Dynasty declined after Akh-en-aton's death, and ended in weakness and confusion in c. 1303 B.C. The next dynasty was at first a powerful one, with able soldiers as kings. They transferred the centre of power and administration from Thebes in the south to the Delta region, where they built a capital, and from where they launched campaigns in order to bring Syria-Palestine into full subjection once more. For most of the thirteenth century the two kings Seti I (1302-1290 B.C.) and Ramesses II (1290-1224 B.C.) held their own in Syria-Palestine though they confronted a powerful enemy in the Hittite Empire, which was seeking to impose its domination on the northern part of the region. A decisive battle was fought at Kadesh on the Orontes in 1286 B.C.; the Egyptian army won, but by a narrow margin, and both the major powers thereafter accepted Kadesh as the boundary between their spheres of influence. The treaty left Ramesses in full control of Palestine and south Syria.

Seti and Ramesses II are of special interest, since they are in all probability the two Pharaohs who oppressed the Israelites in Egypt, according to Exodus 1f.³ The Israelites were put to building work in the Delta region, helping to erect the new capital and centre of government. One of the cities built by Israelite labour was named after Ramesses — the Pi-Ramesse of Egyptian texts, called more simply Rameses (or Raamses) in Exodus 1:11. It was at some time during his long reign, then, that the Israelites escaped into the Sinai wilderness; the whole impression given by the early chapters of Exodus is that the Pharaoh whom Moses and the Israelites thwarted was a powerful monarch, and that it required a miracle to save the Israelites. Ramesses was certainly such a king, till, perhaps, the final years of his long reign. When Joshua and the Israelites were making Palestine their home, however, there was apparently no Egyptian interference, or at least none worth mentioning.

The process of Israelite settlement was evidently taking place during the reign of Merneptah (1224-1214 B.C.). It was now that the Sea Peoples, i.e. people related to the Philistines,⁴ began to put pressures on Egypt, and in 1220 B.C. Merneptah had to fight a defensive operation on his western frontiers, to prevent a combined invasion by Libyans and Sea Peoples. To commemorate his victory,

3. This at least is the widespread view; but the recent study of J. J. Bimson, *Relating the Exodus and Conquest (JSOT Supplement 5: Sheffield, 1978)* places the exodus two centuries earlier, thus supporting the traditional dating.

4. See above, p. 136.

Merneptah set up a monument in a temple in Thebes; the monument is commonly called the "Israel Stele", since it is the earliest document outside the Bible, and indeed the only Egyptian document, to mention Israel by name.⁵ After discussing the battle in the west, the text of the inscription proceeds to turn its attention to Palestine:

Canaan is plundered with every evil;
Ashkelon is taken; Gezer is captured;
Yanoam is made non-existent;
Israel lies desolate; its seed is no more.

It is not clear to what extent these words recount a genuine campaign in Palestine; Egyptian kings were prone to make proud boasts which were not based on fact. At any rate, Merneptah can have done little harm to the Israelites, in view of the fact that the Old Testament does not deign to mention him.⁶ From now on Israelites and Philistines were to fight each other for the mastery of Palestine; Egypt's days of empire were over. The Philistines settled strongly on the Palestinian coast after an attempted sea invasion of Egypt had been driven off by Ramesses III in the early twelfth century. Such outside pressures weakened Egypt considerably, but she was beginning to crumble internally, too, for a variety of reasons. Her holdings in Canaan were not lost to her overnight, but they gradually fell away, so that when in the mid-eleventh century Saul came to the throne of Israel, the least of his problems was Egypt. By this time even the mines in Sinai had been abandoned by the Egyptians.

From Dynasty XXI onwards (c. 1090 B.C.) Egypt went into a gradual decline, and never again achieved more than the occasional foray into Palestine. It was rarely united; it constantly broke up into two states (Upper and Lower Egypt respectively) or even more. Lower Egypt, with its capital at Tanis, was the mercantile centre, and Egypt's contacts with Solomon were probably of a commercial nature. Solomon married the daughter of one of the kings, doubtless to secure a favourable commercial treaty.

Shortly after the Israelite kingdom had broken into two, one king of northern Egypt found the ability and energy to make a foray into Palestine. His name was Shoshenq (the biblical Shishak), a man of Libyan origins who rose to power and founded the Twenty-second Dynasty in 940 B.C. His plundering campaign caused considerable damage and loss to both Rehoboam of Judah and also Jeroboam I of

5. Cf. *DOTT*, pp. 137-141.

6. It is possible that the phrase "the waters of Nephtoah" (in the Hebrew *mei nephtoch*) of Joshua 15:9 commemorates the name of this Egyptian king. For the conjectured route of his campaign, see *MBA*, map 36.

Israel.⁷ But it was a mere flash in the pan; for two centuries thereafter Egypt was weak and uninfluential.

A little before 700 B.C., a Cushite or Ethiopian family achieved the control of Egypt. The founder of Cushite power was a man called Pi-ankhi, whose successors constituted Dynasty XXV. They at first showed more ability than their predecessors, and perforce they showed more interest in Palestine, not because they wished to conquer it, but because the Assyrians were by now dominating it and threatening Egypt too. As early as 725 an Egyptian prince (it is not clear who he was) had persuaded Hoshea, the last king of Israel, to defy Assyria — with disastrous consequences for Israel (cf. 2 Kings 17:4). The early Ethiopian rulers of Egypt conspired in similar fashion with Hezekiah of Judah, and were prepared to send an army into Palestine but Sennacherib's forces defeated it at Eltekeh in 700 B.C.

It was Esarhaddon of Assyria who carried the struggle on to Egyptian soil; he invaded in 671 B.C. and drove the king of Egypt, Taharqa (the biblical Tirhakah), back to his native Cush. Esarhaddon's successor Ashurbanipal at first maintained the Assyrian grip on northern Egypt. Many local Egyptian chiefs were by no means averse to the defeat of the Ethiopian dynasty, and the Assyrians responded by recognizing several of them as local princes, loyal to Assyria. The prince of the city of Sais in the Delta region was one man thus honoured; Psamtik (in Greek form, Psammetichus) by name, he gradually enlarged his realm within Egypt, and as the Assyrian power rapidly waned, he became independent, and king of all Egypt. His Saite dynasty (663-525 B.C.) — Dynasty XXVI — proved to be Egypt's last ruling family with any claim to power. Its early rulers endeavoured to recover some of Egypt's past glories; but they had to depend on Greek mercenaries to wage their wars.

Psamtik I invaded Palestine, if Herodotus is to be believed, and his successor, Necho (609-594 B.C.), right at the outset of his reign, sent an army as far as the Euphrates; Necho's chief purpose was to maintain the balance of power in western Asia by supporting the Assyrians against the Babylonians, but he had no objection to adding Palestine and southern Syria to his own domains. It was he who defeated Josiah of Judah in battle at Megiddo (609 B.C.); and who installed Jehoiakim on the throne in Jerusalem as an Egyptian vassal. However, Babylon's new king, Nebuchadrezzar, speedily put an end to Egypt's hopes of another empire in Asia. Necho's armies suffered two major defeats in 605 B.C., and had to be withdrawn from Palestinian soil.

Necho's successors, Psamtik II and Hophra (the Greek Apries), continued his anti-Babylonian policies, and put a great deal of

7. See above, p. 69.

pressure on Judah's last king, Zedekiah, to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar. When Zedekiah at last yielded to Egyptian wishes, an army was sent to his aid, which did for a brief spell break Nebuchadnezzar's stranglehold on Jerusalem. But Egypt's help was worthless, though she provided a refuge for many Judaeans who fled from their native land (Jeremiah among them).

From then on Egypt declined rapidly. So serious were the internal disorders that when in 525 B.C. the Persian king Cambyses conquered the country, many Egyptians welcomed his arrival and collaborated willingly with him. After that puppet kings in Egypt once or twice tried to reassert Egyptian independence, but the Persians, followed by Alexander and the Greeks, and after them the Romans, held Egypt in a firm grip for many centuries.

Egyptian Language

Genesis 10:6 recognizes Egypt⁸ as one of the chief descendants of Ham — that is to say, as cousins rather than brothers of the Israelites. This relationship rather aptly describes the affinities between the ancient Egyptian language and the Semitic languages such as Hebrew. Egyptian perhaps stood halfway between the Semitic and the Hamitic language families; it stood close enough to Canaanite dialects such as Hebrew to permit ready borrowing in either direction, though in fact the Egyptians seem to have done more of the borrowing than the speakers of Hebrew. The most obvious Egyptian loan-word in Hebrew is the name "Pharaoh", which derives from a pair of words denoting "Great House", originally applied to the Egyptian palace and court, and only later to the person of the king. The word for Noah's "ark", in Hebrew *tebah*, is another example of a loan-word from Egyptian.

The Egyptian language can be traced back to 3000 B.C. or a little later, when a writing system was devised and soon put to extensive use. The script, traditionally described as "hieroglyphic", was deciphered early last century, in consequence of the discovery of the Rosetta Stone (by Napoleon's expedition of 1798). It began as a pictographic script, that is to say that words or parts of words were drawn as representational pictures; human figures, birds and other objects can easily be observed in Egyptian hieroglyphic documents. At an early date the signs came to represent short syllables, and even simple sounds, but the Egyptians never used the potential alphabet they had in their hands, except to write down foreign words.

The invention of writing was early put to good use, and the Egyptian literature that has survived is abundant, written on stone,

8. The "Mizraim" of AV and RV represents the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitsrayim*.

potsherds and papyrus (which lasts much longer in the dry climate of Egypt than in neighbouring countries like Palestine). Proverbial and "wisdom" literature from Egypt dates back to the third millennium, and bears eloquent witness to the intellectual powers of the ancient Egyptians, as also to their literary interests and abilities. Some parts of the Old Testament have been compared with this or that item of Egyptian literature; it is interesting to note that in nearly every case the Egyptian material is the older — indeed, little original literature appears to have been written in Egypt after 1000 B.C. Akh-en-aton's "Hymn to Aton" (fourteenth century)⁹ has sometimes been thought to have inspired Psalm 104; and it is widely held that the "Teaching of Amenemope" (eleventh century or later)¹⁰ lies behind Proverbs 22: 17-24:22, in view of close verbal parallels.

These parallels, whether or not they imply borrowing on the part of the Israelites, at least illustrate the point that when David and Solomon created a new Israel, transforming it from a loose tribal society into a well-organized kingdom where all the arts of civilization might flourish, they could turn to Egypt for advice, precedent, and literature. The lists of officials in the administrations of David and Solomon show that something of a bureaucracy was built up, quite possibly on Egyptian models, and perhaps even with one or two Egyptian personnel.¹¹

Egyptian Religion

On the other hand, Israel stands in marked contrast to Egypt where religious belief and practice is concerned. If all too many Israelites were drawn to Canaanite gods, few appear to have seen any attraction in the Egyptian pantheon. This fact is probably related to the fact that geographically Palestine and Egypt were so different, and we must not forget that ancient man's religious concepts were based on his experience of and understanding of nature. Palestine has few rivers, a very varied, sometimes mountainous terrain, for the most part a temperate climate, and a regular cycle of the seasons, with the life-giving rains falling in the winter months. Egypt, on the other hand, has a remarkably unvaried geography and climate. It is low-lying, consisting of a long valley through which the Nile flows, with the broad Delta to the north; wherever the Nile waters do not reach, there is desert, for rainfall is minimal. Hence all ancient Egypt's major cities — Thebes, Hermopolis, Heliopolis (the biblical On), Memphis, Sais, Tanis (from south to north) lay on or near the great river and its mouths. The sun's heat is powerful all the year round.

9. Cf. *DOTT*, pp. 142-150.

10. Cf. *DOTT*, pp. 172-186.

11. Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*² (London, 1965) pp. 127-132.

Thus where the people of Canaan felt it an urgent matter to please and placate the god of storm and thunder, it was the sun which dominated the religion of Egypt — though worshipped in different ways and under different names, notably Re (or Ra) and Aton. More local deities included Amun at Thebes, Thoth at Hermopolis and Ptah at Memphis; much depended on the king and his seat of government as to which deity received most prominence. (We have already noted how Amen-hotep IV changed his name, to Akh-en-aton, when he changed his capital and when he sought to break the power of the Amun priesthood.) The king was also held to be a god in ancient Egypt; he was revered as the embodiment of Horus son of Osiris, whose cult came closest to being the national cult. Osiris was at once god of vegetation and of the underworld (two concepts which often went together in the ancient world). The well-being of their divine king was vital to the Egyptians, as ensuring their own well-being, in freedom from famine and in the preservation of law and order.

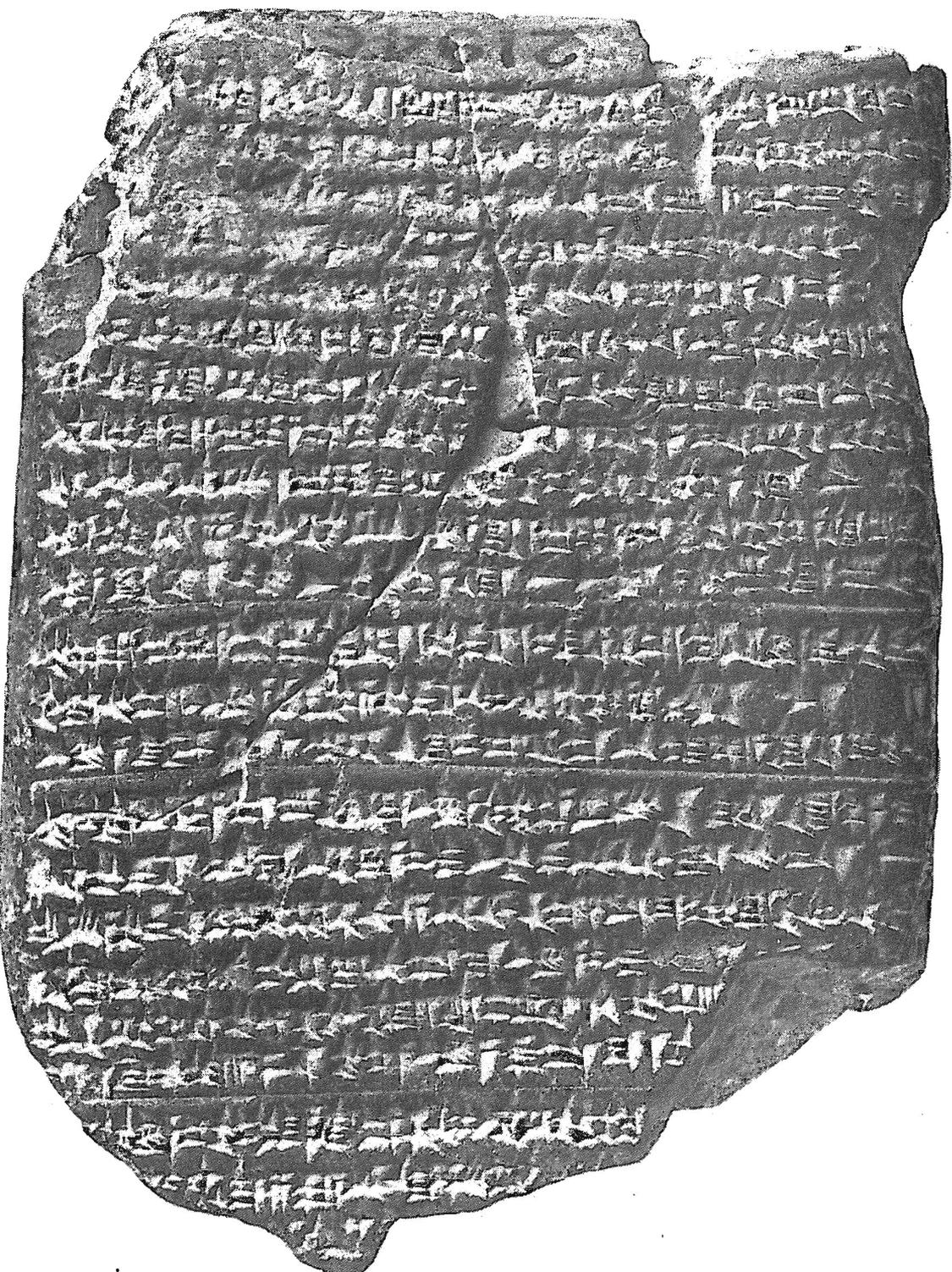
The cult of Osiris developed alongside a highly complex belief in the afterlife. The Egyptian faced death cheerfully and optimistically, prepared for it thoroughly, and ensured that all he would need in the next world should be entombed with his corpse. The tombs of the rich, especially the kings, were very elaborate; and of course the practice of mummification was a characteristic of the funerary rites.

All this made little impression on the ordinary Israelite, and the prophets of Israel and Judah saw little need to denounce the gods of Egypt. Amos in the early eighth century saw no need to denounce Egypt at all. But once Egypt began once more to play a political role in Palestine, the prophets spoke out; it is true, after all, that up to a point Egypt can be blamed for the fall of both Israel and Judah, since she intrigued in both capitals and persuaded both kingdoms to rebel, against Assyria in the one case and against Babylon in the other. In her intrigues Egypt made promises of military support which she was unable to fulfil; we have already observed how weak and divided Egypt became before ever the Hebrew monarchies started, and her final show of power in the time of Nebuchadrezzar was based on foreign mercenaries.

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were the prophets who had most to say against Egypt. The burden of their arguments was the emptiness of Egyptian boasts and the intrinsic weakness of Egyptian shows of military strength. We may single out a statement of biting scorn from each of these three prophetic books. "Vain and worthless is the help of Egypt; therefore have I given her this name, Rahab Quelled" (Isaiah 30:7); thus Isaiah depicted the proud and ancient kingdom as the very embodiment of a powerful monster of primeval chaos (Rahab) — powerless and sitting idle (as other versions have it). Jeremiah's comment needs no commentary: "Give Pharaoh of

Egypt the title King Bombast”, said he, “the man who missed his moment” (46:17). Finally Ezekiel summed up Egyptian promises of help thus: “The support that you gave the Israelites was no better than a reed, which splintered in the hand when they grasped you, and tore their armpits; when they leaned on you, you snapped and their limbs gave way” (29:6f.).

9. Babylonian Chronicle tablet recording the capture of Jerusalem



10. Anthropoid coffin from
Beth-Shan

