

CHAPTER VI

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE PENTATEUCH

IT is now time to turn from Babylonia to Egypt, from the clay tablets and monoliths of Assyria or Babylonia to the papyri and temples of the valley of the Nile. We have seen how the most confidently announced assumptions and 'results' of 'criticism' have crumbled into dust before the facts of archaeology in the departments of history and law; we must now consider whether the same is the case in the province of geography. That the geography of Palestine itself and the lands immediately adjoining it should be correctly described in the Old Testament narratives proves little either one way or another for their authenticity and age; on any supposition the writers of them lived in the country wherein the scene of the narratives is laid, and except in an intentionally 'Haggadic' production like the apocryphal Book of Judith the details of its geography would be correctly given.

But it is otherwise when we pass from Palestine to Egypt. The political changes which swept over the monarchy of the Nile profoundly altered from time to time the geography of the Delta and its relations to Asia. Fortified cities were built and deserted, capitals were shifted, and canals opened or blocked up. The geography of the Eastern Delta differed essentially at different periods of Egyptian history. A map of it drawn in the age of the Nineteenth Dynasty would have presented wholly different features from one drawn at any other time.

There are three periods when Old Testament history comes into contact with that of Egypt, the patriarchal period, the period of the Exodus, and the period of the Israelitish kings. Of these the period of the Exodus is the only one which concerns us at present. If the 'critic' is right, the story of the Exodus was written down centuries after the supposed event, and was derived, not from contemporaneous documents, but from popular tradition and legend. Let us once more apply the archaeological test, and see what is the verdict.

Egyptologists were long since agreed that if

there is any truth in the story of the Exodus Ramses II, the great Pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty, must have been the Pharaoh of the Oppression. One of the chief objects with which the Egypt Exploration Fund was started was to put this conclusion to the proof, and it was not long before the object was achieved. We are told in the Book of Exodus that the two cities built by the Israelites for the Pharaoh were Pithom and Raamses. That Raamses was built by Ramses II was already known from a papyrus which gives an account of the city, and in 1884 Dr. Naville discovered the ruins of Pithom. Excavations soon revealed the further fact that Pithom too owed its foundation to the same Pharaoh, and thus established once for all—if the Biblical statement is correct—that Ramses II and the Pharaoh at whose court Moses was brought up were one and the same.

It is thus clear that the Exodus took place while the Nineteenth Dynasty was still reigning in Egypt. If, therefore, the Biblical account of the Exodus is historically true, the geographical details involved in it must correspond with the map of the Delta as it existed at that particular epoch. If, on the other hand, the map pre-

supposed by them is of a later date, the critical contention will be justified and the story of Moses evaporates into mist.

Now it so happens that we know a good deal about the geography of the Eastern Delta in the age of the Nineteenth Dynasty, thanks to the papyri which have come down to us from that period. Egypt was protected from Asia by a great line of fortifications, the Shur, or 'Wall,' as it is called in the Pentateuch, which followed much the same course as the Suez Canal of to-day. The passages through the Wall were strongly guarded, and to the west of it was the district of Thukot or Succoth, of which Pithom was the capital. Goshen stretched westwards of this in the Wadi Tumulât along the banks of the modern Freshwater Canal and in the direction of Belbeis and Zagazig.

Meneptah, the son and successor of Ramses II, built a Khetem or 'Fortress' in the district of Thukot, which may have been the Etham of the Pentateuch. But Khetem was a generic name corresponding to the Semitic Migdol, and there was another Khetem built by Ramses II which was nearer to the Wall. Both Khetems would have been 'on the edge of the wilderness.'

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The land of Goshen, we are expressly informed by Meneptah, had been left 'as pasture for cattle' and handed over to Asiatic nomads 'since the days of his forefathers.' In the fifth year of his reign, when Libyan invaders were overrunning Egypt, it was still in the possession of the 'foreigners,' and on the skirts of it accordingly the invaders and their allies had pitched their tents. Shortly afterwards, however, the Asiatic herdsmen had disappeared, and the whole district was without inhabitants. A letter written to the Pharaoh in the eighth year of his reign by an official stationed on the frontier makes this clear. The writer says in it: 'We have allowed the tribes of the Bedawin from Edom to pass the fortress (Khetem) of Meneptah in the district of Thukot [and go] to the lakes of Pithom of Meneptah in the district of Thukot, in order to feed themselves and their herds on the great estate of the Pharaoh.' This 'great estate' may be 'the farmstead' which the Septuagint substitutes for Pi-hahiroth in Exod. xiv. 9. At any rate, the lakes lay to the west of Pithom, and their site can still be recognized.

That the district was regarded as a private domain of the Pharaohs may be gathered from

the Old Testament narrative. It was given by the Pharaoh to Jacob and his sons, as Menepthah repeats had been the case; and when the Israelites were transformed into royal serfs it must have been upon the plea that the land on which they dwelt was peculiarly a possession of the king; their exodus left it deserted, and the jealously guarded gates of the great Wall were accordingly opened, to let new settlers enter the vacant pastures.

There is yet another letter on papyrus which supplements the geographical information of the first. It was sent to Menepthah's successor Seti II, and describes the pursuit of two fugitive slaves who had escaped along the same road as that which had been followed by the Israelites:— 'I set out,' says the writer, 'from the hall of the royal palace on the ninth day of the month Epiphi, in the evening, in pursuit of the two slaves. I reached the fortress (Khetem) of Thukot on the tenth of Epiphi. I was informed that the men had resolved to take their way towards the south. On the twelfth I reached the fortress. There I learnt that grooms who had come from the neighbourhood [had reported] that the fugitives had already passed the Wall

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to the north of the Migdol of King Seti,' who may be either Seti I, the father of Ramses II, or Seti II, his great-grandson.

The Wall extended southwards until it met an arm of the Gulf of Suez. Dr. Naville has shown that this must have extended a good deal further north than it does to-day, and the fugitive from Egypt would have found it difficult to evade the vigilance of the Egyptian garrisons.

Such was the geography of the Delta at the time when, if the historical details of the Book of Exodus may be trusted, Moses was born in the land of Goshen and his fellow-countrymen escaped finally from their house of bondage. It was a geography that was not true either of the age which preceded the Nineteenth Dynasty or of the centuries which followed it. After the fall of the successors of Ramses II we hear no more of Thukot and its Khetem, of Migdol on the line of fortification, or even of the Wall itself. The district of Goshen is no longer set apart for the Semitic herdsmen of Canaan. The political situation was changed, and with the change in the political situation came a change in the map of the land.

It is, however, with the map of the Delta in

the age of the Nineteenth Dynasty that the geography of the Exodus agrees. Pithom and Raamses were built for the Pharaoh of the Oppression, and when the flight from Egypt took place in the reign of his successor the Israelites passed from their old homes in the land of Goshen to Raamses and Succoth, and from thence to the Khetem 'on the edge of the wilderness.' Here they found themselves confronted by the Wall with its Migdol, while the sea barred their way towards the south (Exod. xiv. 2). The desert had 'shut them in,' and it seemed as if they would fall an easy prey to the pursuing forces of their late masters.

This agreement of the geography of the Exodus with the actual geography of the Delta in the time of the Nineteenth Dynasty could hardly be explained, if the Biblical narrative had been compiled two or three hundred years after the event, in an age when the map of Egypt had been altered and the older geography forgotten. Still less could it be explained, if the whole story had been invented or thrown into shape in Palestine. There was no atlas to which the Hebrew writer could have turned, much less an atlas which represented geo-

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graphical conditions that had long since passed away. History fixes the Exodus of Israel in the epoch of the Nineteenth Dynasty, and geography assigns it to the same date. To that period, and to that period alone, does the geography of the Pentateuch apply.

The fact admits of only one explanation. The story of the Exodus, as it is set before us in the Old Testament, must have been derived from contemporaneous written documents, and must describe events which actually took place. It is no fiction or myth, no legend whose only basis is folk-lore and unsubstantial tradition, but history in the real sense of the word. We may rest assured, 'criticism' notwithstanding, that Israel was once in Egypt, and that the narrative of its flight under the leadership of Moses is founded on sober fact.