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Dealings with Egypt

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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Dealings with Egypt

The Book of Mormon insists emphatically and specifically that Lehi had acquired at least a veneer of Egyptian culture. Only within the last few decades have students come to appreciate the intimate cultural ties between Egypt and Palestine in Lehi's day. Here we note some of the discoveries that have brought about that surprising realization. Though Lehi's loyalty to Egypt seems mainly cultural, there is a good deal in the Book of Mormon to indicate business ties as well. Here we present two documents describing business dealings between Egypt and Palestine in ancient times: the one depicts the nature of overland traffic between two regions, the other gives a picture of trade by sea. That Lehi was interested also in the latter type of commerce is apparent from the prominence of the name of Sidon in the Book of Mormon.

Israel's Cultural Dependence on Egypt

Students have often speculated of recent years on the strange and suicidal devotion of the Jews to the cause of Egypt in the time of Zedekiah. We shall treat the political side of the question in the next lesson. Lehi was in the peculiar position of opposing the pro-Egyptian party (1 Nephi 7:14) while remaining an enthusiast for Egyptian culture (1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4). There is nothing paradoxical about that. Egypt had recently come under the sway of a corrupt and incompetent government, which in fact was about to fall to a popular revolution, but that did not mean that Egyptian cultural heritage had ceased to be the greatest in the world, and the Book of Mormon concern with Egypt is strictly cultural.

It has been learned within the last generation that cultural and economic ties between ancient Israel and Egypt were far stronger than anyone had hitherto supposed.

J. W. Jack noted in 1938 that "excavations have shown a closer connection with the land of the Pharaohs than was suspected. . . . The authorities at Lachish were probably using, or at least were accustomed to the Egyptian calendar and the Egyptian system of numeration in their local records." Though this goes for an earlier time, "all indications point to this connection with Egypt continuing unbroken right down to the end of the Jewish monarchy."¹ One anthropologist went so far as to claim that Lachish was actually an Egyptian colony, but investigation shows that the same "Egyptian" physical type and the same predominance of Egyptian culture prevails elsewhere in Palestine.² Recently found ivories, seals, inscriptions, and the preliminary study of mounds throughout the land all tell the same story—overwhelming and unexpected preponderance of Egyptian influence, to the equally surprising exclusion of influences from Babylonia and Assyria.³ At Jerusalem itself, where excavation is necessarily limited, sealings on jar handles attest the same long reign of Egyptian culture.⁴ At the same time, the Elephantine papyri tell us another thing that scholars never dreamed of and which they were at first most reluctant to believe, namely, that colonies of Jewish soldiers and merchants were entirely at home in upper Egypt, where they enjoyed free practice of their religion. The ties between Palestine and Egypt were, moreover, of a very long standing, centuries of "a common Hebrew-Egyptian environment" being necessary to produce the permeation of Egyptian modes of thought and expression into Hebrew, and to load the Egyptian vocabulary with words out of Palestine and Syria.⁵ The newly identified *Achtungstexte* show that as early as 2000 B.C. "Palestine was tributary in large part, at least, to Egypt," while the excavation of Byblos, a veritable little Egypt, proved the presence of the Egyptian empire in later centuries.⁶

To say that Egyptian culture is predominant in an area is not necessarily to argue the presence of Egyptian

dominion. According to Hogarth, Egypt exercised the following three degrees of empire. The first degree was rule by direct force, the second by "fear of reconquest which a few garrisons and agents and the prestige of the conqueror could keep alive in the minds of indirect administrators and native subjects," and the third degree "meant little more than a sphere of exclusive influence, from which tribute was expected, but, not being secured by garrisons or representatives, . . . tended to be intermittent." Thus we see that the position of Egypt as "most favored nation" in Judah may represent any degree of decayed dominion – even to an "empire" of fourth degree. It was the Egyptian cultural heritage rather than her government that was all-powerful, Egyptian influence being strongest in Palestine *after* Egypt had passed her peak as a world power.

In the great days of Egypt the renowned Ipuwer had said, "The foreigners have become Egyptians everywhere," and a near contemporary of Lehi can boast, "Behold, are not the Ethiopian, the Syrian, and all foreigners alike instructed in the language of Egypt?"⁸ For centuries it was the custom of the princes of Syria to send their sons to Egypt to be educated.⁹ No matter how sorry the plight of Egypt, the boastful inscriptions of her rulers – sometimes very feeble ones – proclaim the absolute and unquestioned superiority of Egyptian civilization to all others; with Egyptians that is an article of faith. Like the English in our own days, the Egyptians demonstrated time and again the ability to maintain a power and influence in the world out of all proportion to their physical resources; with no other means than a perfect and tenacious confidence in the divine superiority of Egypt and Ammon, Wenamon almost succeeded in overawing the great prince of Byblos. Is it any wonder then, that in a time when Egypt was enjoying the short but almost miraculous revival of splendor that marked the XXVI Dynasty, with its astonishing climax of world

trade, the credit of that country should stand high in the land of Jerusalem?

Economic Ties

Lehi's main business was with Egypt, carried on both by land and sea. The caravan business with Egypt was of immense antiquity. The names of merchants scratched on the hot rocks of the passes leading into the Nile Valley can still be read, and some of them go back to the Old Kingdom, or the very beginning of civilization.¹⁰ By Lehi's day the endless centuries of coming and going had established a common system of weights and measures among the merchants of all the East, in which the Egyptian system predominated.¹¹ In brilliant tomb-paintings we still see the Amu from Syria and Palestine coming into Egypt with their wares, while from Arabia come inscriptions that confirm the story from the other side. "[This is] the sarcophagus of Zidbal, son of Zid . . . who imported myrrh and calamus perfumes for the temples of the gods of Egypt."¹² One particular document deserves to be cited at some length, since it is a firsthand account of intercourse across the desert between Egypt and Syro-Palestine in the days of the Pharaohs.

A Picture of Contacts between Egypt and Palestine

We refer to the journal of an Egyptian border official, written in 1222 B.C. and discovered on the back of the Papyrus Anastasi III in 1899.¹³ This functionary kept a careful record each day of persons passing through an important outpost on the road between Egypt and Syria, giving their names, families, home towns, destination, and business. Thus on such and such a day, for example, Pa-mr-khetem the son of Any of the city of Mr-n-ptah in the Imr district is on his way to Egypt on official business as chief of the royal stables. He is carrying two important letters, one from a certain Pa-ra-m-hb. On another day, "To Syria, Nht-

amon, son of T-r from the castle of M. in the regions of the borders of Jerrem, with two letters for Syria, one addressed to Pen-amon, a commander of occupation troops, and the other to the butler Ra-mes-sw-nekht, from the city." Again, there passes through the commander of the archers from the oasis-post of Mr-n-pth-htp-hr-ma in the mountains, on his way "to raise troops at the fortress which is called Sile." When one remembers that this is the sort of world with which Lehi's people were familiar, and that their whole culture is but an offshoot and reflection of this one, the strange resemblances of things and names in these letters to those in the Book of Mormon (e.g., the exchange of military letters, such expressions as the "borders of Jerrem" and the predominance of names compounded with the elements Pa-, mr-, and -amon) is not to be lightly brushed aside.

Sidon and the Sea Trades

But to carry on business with Egypt, ships were necessary as well as caravans, and for ships, Lehi would have to depend on the people of the coast. Even the Egyptians of 600 B.C., striving as they were to regain supremacy of sea trade, had their huge seagoing ships manned exclusively by Syrian and Phoenician crews, though Egypt was a maritime nation.¹⁴ But Israel had no ports at all; her one ambitious maritime undertaking had to be carried on with the aid and cooperation of Tyre, who took unscrupulous advantage of her land-lubber neighbor.¹⁵

But for centuries it had been Sidon that had taken the lead; it was Sidon that gave its name to all the Phoenicians — Homer's Sidonians — and Sidon still remained in business.¹⁶ But now was Tyre's great day; by pushing and aggressive tactics she was running the show, and no doubt charging excessive rates.¹⁷

Now it is significant that whereas the name of Sidon enjoys great popularity in the Book of Mormon, in both its

Egyptian (*Giddonah*) and Hebrew forms, the name of Tyre never appears in the book. That is actually as it should be, for in Lehi's day there was bitter rivalry between the two, and to support the one was to oppose the other. The upstart nobility that were running and ruining things at the court of Zedekiah were putting their money on Tyre, so to speak, and when Nebuchadnezzar came west on the fatal expedition that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem, one of his main objectives, if not the main one, was to knock out Tyre.¹⁸ Up until quite recently it was believed that his thirteen-year siege of the city on the rock was unsuccessful, but now it is known for sure that Tyre was actually taken and destroyed, upon which Sidon enjoyed a brief revival of supremacy.¹⁹ Now Lehi shared the position of Jeremiah (1 Nephi 7:14), who was opposed to the policy of the court in supporting Egypt against Babylon; that meant that he was anti-Tyre and pro-Sidon.

A Harbor Sketch

To match the record of the Egyptian border official cited above, we have a recent discovery from Egypt which presents a most vivid picture of sea trade between that country and Syria-Palestine in the great days of the XVIII Dynasty. The walls of a newly opened tomb at Thebes (No. 162) are covered with pictures of Syrian merchants doing business in an Egyptian harbor in the time of Amenophis III (1405-1370 B.C.). "The event here recorded," write Davies and Faulkner, "was doubtless one of fairly frequent occurrence during the palmy days of the Empire. . . . We probably shall not be far wrong if we see in this representation the beginnings of that maritime trade from Syrian ports which . . . culminated in the far-flung mercantile ventures of the Phoenicians,"²⁰ and which reached its peak, we might add, both for Egypt and Phoenicia, in the time of Lehi, when "Phoenician galleys filled the Nile mouths, and Semitic merchants . . . thronged the Delta."²¹

In the tomb in question, which was that of Qenamun, the mayor of the great city of Thebes, "at the lowermost shop a Syrian merchant is trying to sell a large jar of wine or oil. . . . The small hand-scales being used by the two male shopkeepers suggests the possible use of gold-dust as a medium of exchange." This would seem to support our statement in *Lehi in the Desert* that "lists of goods imported into Egypt from Palestine show that the great men of the East took the gold of Egypt in return for their wine, oil, grain, and honey, the first three far outclassing all other commodities in importance." If the Jews had to trade for raw gold, they knew what to do with it when they got it, and some have maintained that the Hebrews were the greatest goldsmiths of antiquity. "Goods for sale," our authorities continue, "consist largely of great jars of wine or oil, but a notable item of cargo consists of two humped bulls of a foreign breed. Other articles offered consist of bowls containing costly materials of various kinds and specimens of the jeweler's craft in the form of vases of precious metal."²²

"Herzfeld estimates that 133 different materials were brought to Palestine from these outside lands in addition to the 87 commodities produced at home";²³ and Hölscher described the Phoenician merchants as importing metals, slaves, and riding animals from overseas to exchange for the ivory, gold, jewels, spice, balsam, and woven stuffs brought in by the caravans.²⁴ The Egyptians always traded manufactured goods (weapons, jewelry, glassware, cloth, wine, cosmetics, etc.) for natural products: gold, myrrh, ebony, incense, aromatic wood, animals, antimony, ivory, tortoise-shell, slaves, etc.²⁵ In the Qenamun tomb, along with the big commerce "there seems to have been no regulation against small scale private trading. The waterside where the foreign ships moored was therefore lined with small booths in which Egyptian shopkeepers, women as well as men, plied a lively trade." In this petty trade the

Egyptians try to sell the visiting sailors "textiles, sandals, foodstuffs, and other items."²⁶

Precious Things

Another Egyptian tomb depicting Syrian goods being brought to a local noble gives us a good idea of what passed as "precious things" in the world of Lehi: a vase rimmed with finely wrought pomegranates and labeled in the picture "a vessel of gold," a blue cruse, a chariot, a bow and quiver, horses, a halberd, a blue double-handled jar labeled "vessel of lapis lazuli," a dagger, a jar of incense, an ointment horn, a jar labeled "silver vessel," a strip of cloth, a quiver, a decorated linen sash, a hardwood stick, another silver vessel so labeled, and a bear on a leash.²⁷ It is interesting that the gold and silver items are so designated, while the rest go by the collective name of "precious things," since the same usage is evidenced four times in two chapters of 1 Nephi (2 and 3). Davies and Faulkner suggest that in the Theban tomb, "No doubt some of the more precious and portable articles" were destined as a special gift for Qenamun himself in return for his services in smoothing the way as mayor and "as a commission on the deal."²⁸ One cannot help recalling at this point how Nephi and his brothers tried to bribe Laban by bringing to his court just such precious and portable articles, to smooth the way in their transaction with him.

Let us summarize by recalling what we first learned about Lehi from the Book of Mormon. He was exceedingly rich, and his wealth took the form of all manner of precious things, with an accent on gold and silver; his treasures were portable, and he and his sons knew and appreciated fine metal work when they saw it. In a land that produced no precious metals, Lehi could have acquired these things only by inheritance or trade. What he got by inheritance, however, was an estate in the country, and the origin of his wealth may be confidently detected in his intimate knowl-

edge of vine and olive culture. That he traded is clearly implied by his close—almost sentimental—ties with the great non-Jewish port of Sidon and with the great culture of Egypt. That he and his sons knew a good deal about caravan techniques is obvious, and yet we are explicitly told that they knew nothing at all about shipbuilding (1 Nephi 17:17; 18:2). Why should they? Shipbuilding was the jealously guarded monopoly of the coast people. As far as the business affairs of Lehi are set before us in the Book of Mormon, everything is exactly as it should be.

Questions

1. What has been the main trend of discovery regarding ancient contacts between Israel and Egypt?
2. How was trade carried on between the two countries?
3. What type of evidence indicates the cultural dependence of Palestine on Egypt? How extensive was that dependence?
4. What evidence bears out the report in the Book of Mormon that an important man in Israel might learn Egyptian and have his children do the same?
5. What in the Egyptian frontier official's reports reminds one of the Book of Mormon?
6. What indication is there in the Book of Mormon that Lehi may have engaged in trade by sea?
7. What indication is there in the Book of Mormon that Lehi had any connections at all with Egypt?
8. What was the nature of Lehi's "precious things"? How and where could he have acquired them?
9. How can the prominence of the name Sidon (including its Egyptian form Giddonah) and the absence of that of Tyre, an even more important port, be explained? Why is Tyre snubbed?
10. How does the commission or bribe to Qenamun confirm the Book of Mormon account of business methods in dealing with high officials?