Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections

The Past and Future of "Biblical Egyptology"

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Abstract
Egypt is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible numerous times, but despite multiple studies, the Egyptian background referred to in the Bible remains historically elusive. This is due to the fact that Egyptian details from the biblical source (names, epithets) can often be correlated with more than one period in Egypt's history. These difficulties have prevented the Egyptian aspect from becoming a major factor in biblical studies. To rectify this state, it is here suggested to employ a different methodology: rather than seeking parallels to the Bible's Egyptian details, one should ask how and when these details came to be known in the biblical traditions of Judah and Israel. The article will discuss possible scenarios of transmission as viewed through the archaeological record pertaining to the relations between Egypt and Israel during the Iron Age.

Introduction

"Biblical Egyptology," like its more famous cousin "biblical archaeology," is a term used here to describe early scholarship employment of Egyptology in the quest to "prove" the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible. In both cases, items collected from the so-called supporting field (archaeology/Egyptology) were presented as compatible with certain details from the biblical text, thus demonstrating its reliability.[1]

As in any practice that aims to prove a preconceived idea, "Biblical Egyptology" consistently undermined the methodologies of both Egyptology and biblical research. Thus, various studies gave only little credence to two important aspects of the Egypt-Bible interface, namely that: 1. The biblical text was undoubtedly a product of the Iron Age, therefore the Egyptian Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms were insufficient contexts as a basis for comparison; 2. The Egyptian culture was famously traditional and general traits tended to change very little over time.

Consequently, a certain biblical detail could be successfully compared with various Egyptian parallels representative of more than one period in Egyptian history, leaving the question of the biblical compilation date unresolved (see below). This inconclusiveness resulted in a diminished role for Egyptology in that sphere of biblical research that was preoccupied mainly with finding extra-biblical corroborations of the biblical events.

However, Ancient Egypt remains an endless source of information on the cultural *milieu* of biblical times, and Egyptological studies can and should assume a more significant role in biblical research. The fact that Egyptian records cannot, for the most part, corroborate biblical events is only a problem if one continues to pursue questions of biblical credibility. Alternatively, if one dares to present different questions, Egyptology has much more to offer.[2]

These new questions should ask not what is Egyptian in the Bible, but rather how did Egyptian traditions find their way into the biblical texts?

Primarily, these questions deal with the historical relations between Egypt and the Levant, and how these could have affected the biblical text.

In the following lines, I shall present a brief history of early scholarship dealing with the integrations of Egyptology and biblical research and then postulate on the different methods that can be developed for future research.

History of Scholarship

The search for biblical Egypt began in the earliest days of Egyptological research. Being a well-documented ancient culture of the biblical era, Ancient Egypt provided Egyptologists with a wealth of possible parallels between biblical events and Egyptian historical records.[3] However, these studies were inconclusive in determining a specific historical background for the biblical narratives.

The Exodus narrative, for example, describes Asiatic peoples in Egypt, possibly in the Delta, a phenomenon attested during most of Egypt's history.[4] Certain aspects of the Israelite enslavement, forced labor and flight through the eastern Egyptian border were therefore correlated with either New Kingdom records,[5] or with the Hyksos expulsion in the Second Intermediate Period.[6]

Similarly, the Joseph narrative was assigned either to the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period,[7] the New Kingdom era,[8] or to the Saite-Persian period.[9] Therefore, Egyptian parallels to biblical details could be found throughout Egyptian history and could not be used as a *fossil directeur*.

Nevertheless, Redford's treatment of the Joseph story[10] marked a true departure from previous methodologies, leading the way to well-informed integrations of biblical scholarship by Egyptologists.

This approach is most evident with regard to the Egyptian inspirations in the books of Psalms (104), Proverbs, and the Song of Songs[11] demonstrating a biblical familiarity with Egyptian wisdom literature,[12] although how and when these influences were imprinted remained debatable.

More recently, scholars have re-examined these issues through the archaeological lens reflecting Egypto-Levantine inter-connections, and suggested somewhat earlier transmission dates. Na'aman has suggested that the Exodus tradition was based on the events of the 19th–20th Dynasties' oppression in Canaan itself, modified through collective memory to have occurred in Egypt rather than in Canaan.[13] Schipper viewed the Egyptian presence in Canaan during the 19th–20th Dynasties, as resulting in an Egyptian style that lingered in Canaan well into the Iron Age, therefore affecting local traditions.[14]

Such archaeological approaches were often based on the wealth of information pertaining to the interactions between Egypt and Canaan during the Late Bronze Age,[15] as opposed to the meager data on the Iron Age exchange.[16] Therefore, only few studies have referred specifically to the archaeology of the *Iron Age*.

Ash examined the biblical description of Egypt's relations with the united monarchy *vis à vis* the archaeological record. He concluded that no extra-biblical evidence could support the close ties described in the text.[17] However, Ash's review of Iron Age remains was restricted to the early 10th century BCE as dictated by the biblical dates for David and Solomon.

A different methodology altogether was introduced by Schipper, who attempted to define periods of interaction between Egypt and Israel and determine their effects on the biblical text.[18] Schipper identified a period of direct Egyptian involvement in Judah during the late 7th and 6th centuries BCE, providing a possible context for the Egyptian influence on the Book of Proverbs.

Schipper's pioneering work can now be supplemented by new archaeological research regarding the interrelations between Egypt and Israel in the 11th, late 10th–early 9th, and late 8th centuries BCE as evidenced by the dispersion of Egyptian finds,[19] attesting to direct Egyptian influences even before the 7th century BCE.

Towards a New Methodology

In order to gain further insight into the Egypt-Bible interface, an increased consideration of the archaeological evidence should be introduced. Traditional methodology isolates a specific "Egyptian" detail from the biblical text, presents its Egyptian parallels, and suggests a historical background based on these parallels. An alternative methodology suggests that one should identify—through the archaeological record—possible events of interaction between Egypt and Ancient Israel and consider whether the "Egyptian" detail could have been transmitted via either of these interactions. Finding an appropriate event of interaction may point to the historical background of the biblical text in a more convincing manner than the presentation of Egyptian parallels, which are notoriously confusing due to their longevity in Egyptian culture.

During the Iron Age, different types of cultural

interactions between Egypt and the Levant, could have resulted in the transmission of different traditions, respectively. For example, a commercial interaction could result in the consumption of Egyptian commodities, thus allowing knowledge of Egyptian products to enter the textual traditions at the port of entry in the Levant. Such an interaction would be confined to the region of the port and limited in scope to the commodities involved. If, however, a more intense interaction accompanied the commercial relation, such as the establishment of Egyptian institutions at the port of entry, one would expect other traditions to migrate from Egypt to the receiving port. These would include knowledge of Egyptian cult, ideology and symbolism and not just the consumption of Egyptian commodities.

The first step of such a method is therefore the identification of possible transmission points, their regional scope and the nature of the interaction. Four archaeological phases of interaction between Egypt and the territories of Philistia, Israel, and Judah during the Iron Age can be established: (1) the sudden influx of Egyptian elements in the major sites of Philistia and the Carmel coast in the 11th century BCE;[20] (2) the appearance of imported and locally produced Egyptian-style pottery in the Beer-Sheba valley, the Negev, and the Shephelah in the mid-10th–mid-9th centuries BCE[21] along with Egyptian seals[22] and architecture,[23] probably associated with the campaign of Sheshonq I; (3) the reappearance of Egyptian pottery and artifacts in the destruction layers of the late 8th century BCE sites in Judah;[24] (4) the use of Egyptian cultic finds at Ashdod, Ekron, Ashkelon, and Mezad Hashavyahu from the late 7th–6th centuries BCE.[25]

Each of these phases exhibits different aspects of cultural interaction and relates to different regions. A finer characterization of these phases is therefore instructive in assessing the possible transmission of traditions from Egypt to ancient Israel. While the fourth phase has already been the subject of various studies, the first three have only been marginally considered as a basis for Egyptian traditions in the Bible, and shall be discussed in more detail below.

Phase 1

The earliest Iron Age interactions between Egypt and the southern Levant can be traced to the Philistine sphere through the appearance of Egyptian iconographic motifs and burial customs. Most notable is the incorporation of the Egyptian lotus motif into decorative compositions on certain types of Philistine Bichrome jugs. This motif was not assimilated in Philistia through Canaanite intermediaries since the lotus motif was previously uncommon in the repertoire of the Canaanite potter and can be traced directly to decorated pottery in Egypt proper.[26] The image of the lotus flower, an Egyptian symbol of the renewal of the body after death, was found within Philistine burial contexts, seemingly adopting the symbolic application of the lotus in Egyptian tombs.

Two of the sites that yielded these lotus-decorated jugs also exhibited other aspects of Egyptian burials. In Ashkelon, a burial within an imported Egyptian jar bore an incised depiction of the god Anubis/Wepwawet, an Egyptian deity charged with safekeeping the dead.[27] At the site of Tell el-Far'ah (South), Egyptian rock-cut tombs of the LBA were reused in the early Iron Age[28] and Philistine Bichrome Ware was deposited in the tombs, including some bearing lotus motifs.

The practice of Egyptian cult in Philistia was not restricted to funerary contexts and included also the worship of Amun, whose imagery and name appeared on locally produced conoid seals from southwestern Israel.[29]

The exact nature of the cultural interaction that prompted these Egyptian burial practices and religious beliefs in Philistia is obscured by the absence of any written sources on the relations between Egypt and Philistia in the early Iron Age. It can be cautiously suggested that some Egyptian elements lingered in southwestern Canaan after the decline of the Egyptian empire in the Levant.[30] Alternatively, it can be assumed that some inhabitants of the region adopted Egyptian beliefs concerning the afterlife following significant exposure to Egyptian ideology. Yet another option considers Philistine adoption of Egyptian traditions as a strategy for creating group identity that connects the newcomers with the previous lords of the land.[31]

Regardless of the reasons, this intercultural event can be defined as allowing for the transmission of Egyptian cultic traditions into the region of southwestern Israel (in its modern sense) or ancient Philistia.

North of Philistia, in early Iron Age Dor and its environs, a different kind of interaction existed—one

of a more commercial nature. While this has left a clear mark on the archaeological remains in the form of Egyptian imports including store-jars, large quantities of Nile perch and post-Ramesside seals, it may have had only a minor cultural impact.[32] Egyptian traditions did not seem to have been assimilated in the north during the Iron Age I. The transmission event can therefore be defined as allowing for the local knowledge of Egyptian commodities without the transmission of the cultural and ideological framework that accompanies them.

Phase 2

The Iron IIA period brought with it a change in the dispersal pattern of Egyptian finds in the Levant. While the preceding Iron Age I exhibited a very limited interaction in both the geographical range and the diversification of material, the settlement strata of the Early Iron IIA showed a wider and more varied distribution pattern. Egyptian pottery, both imported and locally produced, reappeared in the hinterland, namely in the Shephelah, the Beer-Sheba valley and the western Negev.[33] These were accompanied by Egyptian seals of the post-Ramesside type,[34] Egyptian commodities such as Nile perch,[35] and in some cases, as in Tel Masos, by Egyptian architectural elements.[36]

This revival of Egyptian influence in the Levant coincides with the renewed imperialism of Egypt's 22nd Dynasty, commencing with Shehsonq I's campaign to ancient Israel.[37] The distribution pattern of Egyptian finds in the Early Iron IIA coincides with the regions mentioned in Sheshonq's toponym list documenting his campaign through the Negev, the lowlands, and the northern valleys.[38] These renewed interests in the Levant continued throughout the reigns of his successors, Osorkon I and II. Statues of these three Egyptian kings were placed in Byblos to affirm the close ties between Byblos and the Egyptian court in Tanis.[39] Similarly, a gift from the royal court of Osorkon II was found in the palace at Samaria.[40]

These interactions were most likely motivated by economic factors. Byblos provided the source for the cedars of Lebanon, while the Negev provided the gateway to the Arabah copper mines, where a Sheshonq scarab was recently found.[41] Both commodities were essential for the pharaonic court and temple. It is within this time frame, between ca. 950 to 850 BCE, that Egyptian traditions could have easily been introduced through agents of the Egyptian culture, be they military men, traders, or priests.[42] Contrary to common wisdom, Sheshonq's campaign was not a destructive one, therefore allowing for the introduction of Egyptian traditions. This is made evident by the fact that many of the Early Iron Age IIA settlements were not destroyed, but rather abandoned in the late 10th or early 9th centuries BCE,[43] e.g., quite some time *after* Sheshonq's campaign.

To conclude, the "Shehsonq horizon," stretching from the mid-10th century to the mid-9th century BCE was a long event of transmission through which all aspects of Egyptian tradition could have found their way to local communities in the Negev, parts of the Shephelah and the central hill country as well as the northern valleys.

Phase 3

Egyptian connections with the Levant seem to have waned considerably after the reign of Osorkon II, ca. 850–830 BCE. The presence of Egyptian artifacts diminished considerably and royal finds in the Levant became rare. The diminished distribution pattern reflects the changes in central rule that transpired in Egypt. Osorkon II's successors lost their hold over Egypt, remaining the lords of Lower Egypt alone. Local rulers of the 23rd and 24th Dynasties competed over control in both Upper and Lower Egypt and the decentralized state could not sustain meaningful ties with the Levant.[44] A notable exception was the continued evidence for Egyptian commodities at Dor, being a localized phenomenon.[45]

Following this hiatus, the re-emergence of Egyptian interests in the Levant can be traced through the reappearance of Egyptian imports in the stratified layers of Judean sites at the end of the 8th century BCE. These include Egyptian storage jars from Beer Sheba II,[46] Lachish III,[47] Tell el-Far'ah ([South] unstratified),[48] along with amulets and small finds.[49] The typology of the imported storage jars can be regionally attributed to Upper Egypt, an unusual trait that may reflect direct relations between Judah and the Theban region.[50] The reappearance of Egyptian imports in the southern Levant can be safely linked with the accession of the 25th dynasty in Egypt and the attempts of the Nubian kings to regain access to international trade

and perhaps to some hold on southern Israel in the face of the expanding Assyrian empire.[51]

The transmission event can be defined as mostly commercial and restricted to Judean sites of the late 8th century BCE, bringing with it knowledge of the Kushite domination of Egypt.[52]

Phase 4

During the late 7th and 6th centuries BCE, Egyptian artifacts were distributed along the coast of the eastern Mediterranean in growing numbers. A detailed analysis by Schipper emphasizes the presence of cultic artifacts in Philistia (especially at Ashkelon and Ekron), as well as the Egyptian influence on the hieratic numeral system used in Judah.[53] In addition, Egyptian imported pottery was identified at Mezad Hashavyahu.[54] If indeed Judah became a vassal state of Egypt during this period, as inferred from the biblical references, then this event of transmission provided further opportunity for Egyptian traditions of all genres to enter local texts.[55] However, from a strictly archaeological point of view, Egyptian influence during this time was mostly cultic and centered in Philistia and along the coast.

To conclude, the four phases here described provided ample opportunities for the transmission of Egyptian practices and their adoption within local traditions during the first millennium BCE.[56] A study of the Egypt-Bible interface should therefore integrate these four archaeological phases.

Solomon and the Pharaoh's Daughter: A Case Study

A brief example will demonstrate the potential applications of the here-proposed integrative methodology. 1 Kings 9:15–19 describes Solomon's building activities and the capture of Gezer by an unnamed Pharaoh, who later endowed the city to Solomon together with his daughter. The early 10th century BCE biblical setting has prompted Egyptologists to identify the Pharaoh in question with the contemporary King Siamun.[57] However, apart from the biblical account, which remains rather vague, there is no historical or archaeological evidence to suggest that Siamun ever set foot in the Levant.

Various scholars have inferred a campaign against Philistia from a relief fragment portraying Siamun smiting an enemy of unknown ethnicity, as his image did not survive.[58] However, one should stress that the image of the king smiting his enemies is a highly traditional and symbolic representation, crucial for conveying the king's role as upholder of the cosmic balance (*mꜣʿt*) which included, *inter alia*, the subjugation of foreign nations.[59] As a result, an Egyptian pharaoh would be represented in this fashion regardless of his actual participation in such military campaigns.

As such, monumental representations of the pharaoh smiting his enemies did not begin with the actual aggressive maneuvers of the New Kingdom pharaohs, nor did they cease after the end of the Egyptian empire in the Levant. Late Ramesside rulers who were unlikely to campaign in the Levant, such as Ramesses IV and VI, continued to commemorate themselves in the traditional smiting position over Canaanite captives.[60] Similarly, a temple relief of the self-proclaimed Theban king, Herihor, roughly contemporary with Siamun, presents the pharaoh smiting captives from Syria and Nubia.[61] Evidently, the Egyptian pharaohs of the late 20th and of the 21st Dynasties continued to present themselves as triumphing over Canaanite enemies, although there is no evidence to support such claims.

Therefore, the simplistic approach relying on the apparent contemporaneity of Solomon and Siamun leads to misleading results. However, by using the above mentioned integrative approach one can offer two observations: (1) no inter-connections between Egypt and Israel are attested during the early 10th century BCE; (2) the only archaeological and extra-biblical evidence for Egyptian involvement in the northern Shephelah (Gezer) is dated to the mid-10th–mid-9th centuries BCE, attested by the appearance of locally produced Egyptian pottery at Aphek and Gezer (phase 2, above), and corroborated by the emphasis on the Ayalon Valley in Sheshonq's triumphal relief.[62]

Biblical source criticism dates the biblical passage of 1 Kings 9:15–19 to the Neo-Assyrian period[63] although the Pharaoh's daughter was probably a later addition,[64] as should also be the case regarding the building activities in Jerusalem. Stripped of its later additions, the passage refers to building activities at Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Beth-Horon, Baalath, and Tamar in the wilderness, regions and toponyms closely related with Sheshonq's list and

its unique emphasis on the Ayalon Valley and the Negev.

Further exploration of these observations may reflect on the role of northern oral traditions in the deuteronomistic history and Egypt's impact on northern Israelite state formation.

Biblical Egyptology in the Future

The methodology suggested in this paper departs from traditional practice in several important aspects. The most obvious one is the withdrawal from chronological questions that reflect on the search for the historicity behind the biblical events, towards a preoccupation with questions of transmission.[65] Whereas early scholarship attempted to identify parallels for biblical details or events within the vastness of Egypt's history, it is here suggested to confine the search to established periods of cultural interaction between Egypt and ancient Israel no earlier than the Iron Age. Furthermore, it is here suggested to narrow the search by considering the nature and the geographical range of the interaction *vis à vis* the type of Egyptian data included in the text.

The proposed methodology also departs from the traditional line of reasoning generally employed for studying the Egypt-Bible interface. Whereas common practice works its way from a specific detail of Egyptian flavor towards Egyptian parallels thereby providing a historical background, it is here suggested to reverse that process. A reversed process will begin with the possible Egyptian interventions that could have resulted in local knowledge of certain Egyptian traditions of a specific type. Only then, after identifying a possible period of transmission should one seek Egyptian parallels within the identified period alone.

The application of such an integrative approach opens new and exciting possibilities for the decipherment of Egyptian traditions in the Hebrew bible. Among these one can count the alleged Egyptian origin of the Philistines (Genesis 10:13–14); the sojourn of Abram and Sarai in Egypt (Gen 12:10–20); the heroics of David's men against a man from Egypt (2 Samuel 23:21), all of which can be better explained within the framework of the interrelations between Egypt and Philistia or Judah.

Acknowledgements

The present study was conducted during my post-doctoral fellowship at the Romand Institute of Biblical Sciences of the University of Lausanne, under the guidance of Prof. Thomas Römer. The fellowship was funded by a Swiss Government Excellence Scholarship. Supplementary research was conducted at the Tel-Aviv University and supported by a Sinergia project "The History of the Pentateuch: Combining Literary and Archaeological Approaches" (CRSII1 160785/1), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

I am deeply grateful to the Romand Institute and to Prof. Römer for their friendship and support.

Notes

1 The term "biblical Egyptologist" has also been used by Hoffmeier, although I was not aware of that when I titled my presentation for the 2015 workshop in Lausanne. See James K. Hoffmeier, "Egyptologists and the Israelite Exodus from Egypt," in Thomas, E. Levy, Thomas Schneider and William H. C. Propps (eds.) *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 197–208, 200

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47 Olga Tufnell, *Lachish III: The Iron Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pl. 96: 497.

48 J. G. Duncan, *Corpus of Dated Palestinian Pottery* (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1930), pl. 47: W.

49 For a catalogue of Egyptian amulets in Iron Age Israel, see Christian Herrmann, *Ägyptische Amulette aus Palästina/Israel: Mit einem Ausblick auf ihre Rezeption durch das Alte Testament*, OBO 138 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Academic Press, 1994); ibid. *Band II*, OBO 184 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Academic Press, 2002); ibid. *Band III*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis Series Archaeologica 24 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Academic Press, 2006); ibid. *Band IV*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis Series Archaeologica 38 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Academic Press, 2016). For a discussion of Egyptian goddesses amulets in 8th century BCE Judah, see Christopher B. Hays, "The Egyptian Goddess Mut in Iron Age Palestine: Further Data from Amulets and Onomastics," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 71.2 (2012), 299–314.

50 See Ben-Dor Evian 2011, 105–107.

51 Robert Morkot, "Egypt and Nubia," in Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D'Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, and Carla M. Sinopoli (eds.), *Empires. Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 227–251, 249, and see Ben-Dor Evian 2017, 36–37.

52 Such knowledge is evident in contemporary biblical accounts; see Alviero Niccacci, "Isaiah XVIII–XX from an Egyptological Perspective," *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998), 214–238.

53 Schipper 2010, and see Stefan Wimmer, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der altherbäischen Schrift*, Ägypten und Altes Testament 75 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008).

54 Fantalkin 2001, 97. Palestinian pottery was identified in Egyptian sites as well, but its specific link to Judah cannot be ascertained; see Aren M. Maeir, "The Relations between Egypt and the Southern Levant during the Late Iron Age: The Material Evidence from Egypt," *Egypt and the Levant* 12 (2002): 235–46. Judean-type decanter jugs from Egyptian sites were, however, tied directly to Judean refugees; see John S. Holladay, Jr., "Judaeans (and Phoenicians) in Egypt in the Late Seventh to Sixth Centuries B.C.," in Gary N. Knoppers and Antoine Hirsch (eds.) *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World: Studies in Honor of Donald B. Redford*, Probleme der Ägyptologie 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 405–437.

[55] Nadav Na'aman, "The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah," *Tel Aviv* 18 (1991): 3–71; Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*. *Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 23–29; Schipper 2010; Dan'el Kahn, "Why Did Necho II Kill Josiah?," in Jana Mynářová, Pavel Onderka, and Peter Pavúk (eds.) *There and Back Again—The Crossroads II: Proceedings of an International Conference Held in Prague, September 15–18, 2014* (Prague: Charles University in Prague, 2015), 511–528.

[56] Later periods of interconnections, under Achaemenid rule, for example, are beyond the scope of the present article.

[57] Green 1983; Kitchen 2003, 109.

[58] For the relief see Pierre Montet, *La nécropole royale de Tanis I: Les constructions et le tombeau d'Osorkon II à Tanis,* Fouilles de Tanis I (Paris, 1947), pl. IX, A.

[59] Emma S. Hall, *The Pharaoh Smites his Enemies: A Comparative Study*, Münchner ägyptologische Studien 44 (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1986).

[60] A relief fragment from Karnak of Ramesses IV smiting a Syrian and a Nubian captive (Hall 1986, 40); A statue of Ramesses VI from Karnak smiting a Syrian captive (Hall 1986, 40).

[61] Temple of Khonsu court: Hall 1986, 41–42, fig. 82.

[62] Nadav Na'aman, "Shishak's Campaign to Palestine as Reflected by the Epigraphic, Biblical and Archaeological Evidence," *Zion* 63 (1998): 247–276 (Hebrew), 252.

[63] Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History* (London: T and T Clark, 2005), 100.

[64] Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* The Anchor Bible 10 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 300; Römer 2005, 150.

[65] Such an approach is now shared by Egyptologists (for example, Schneider 2015), biblical scholars (Schipper 1999), and archaeologists (Maeir 2015).