

# A NOTE ON THE HYKSOS & JOSEPH'S MARRIAGE

Version 1.0

Who were the Hyksos that settled in northern Egypt? What relationship was there between them and the Israelites? Did Joseph marry an Egyptian woman or a woman of another race? History assists in answering these questions.

## The Egyptians and the Hyksos

To gain a very broad outline of the historical setting of the periods that Egypt may be divided into as generally agreed by most historians, I list them below (I do not enter into a debate whether the Old Kingdom was pre-flood or parallel to later dynasties):

- Old Kingdom: Dynasties I-VI (3110-2258 B.C.)
- First Intermediate Period: Dynasties VII-XI (2258-2000 B.C.)
- Middle Kingdom: Dynasty XII (2000-1786 B.C.)
- Second Intermediate Period: Dynasties XIII-XVII (1786-1570 B.C.)
- New Kingdom: Dynasties XVIII-XXX (1570-332 B.C.)

Details of how the Hyksos came to power are debated amongst scholars, they all agree that they usurped power during the second Intermediate Period.

Around 1750 BC the Babylonians overthrew the Kingdom of Mari (ie the Aramaeans – sometimes incorrectly labelled as Amorites by historians). Many of the tribes under Mari control migrated westwards and infiltrated into the Goshen or delta region of northern Egypt. The Egyptians called them Hikau khasut or Hyksos. Hyksos variously means “Rulers of Foreign Countries” or “Shepherd-Kings”.<sup>i</sup>

In *Act of God*, Graham Phillips nicely summarises the research into this matter:

“Hikau khasut seems to have been the term the Egyptians used for the chieftains of the city states which the migrant Mari people had established in Canaan ... There is even evidence of a people who may actually have been the Israelites being prominent among the Hyksos slaves. They are specifically referred to as Apiru – also rendered as Hapiru or Habiru by some translators – a name which some scholars believe to have been the origin of the word Hebrew ... In fact the word Apiru almost certainly refers to a specific Hyksos tribe.”<sup>ii</sup>

After infiltrating and settling in the delta area over a long period, they eventually became powerful enough to take over the northern part of Egypt where they reigned about 150 years - c1720-1570 BC.. It is therefore very reasonable to assume that Jacob and his family had entered Egypt during this period of Hyksos control.<sup>iii</sup> The Israelites multiplied in the Nile delta where the Hyksos were centred<sup>iv</sup>.

Hyksos has also been identified with the Kasdim (Kassites) and Midianites, Hurrians (sometimes mistakenly identified with Horites) and especially the Aramaeans (the Mar.Tu or Amurru) whose major city was Mari, Canaanites and Amorites. This is why they are called a ‘mixed multitude’ by historians. A similar description is given to those tribes that later fled Egypt with Israel (Ex 12:38) of whom many or most had Hurrian names<sup>v</sup>.

They adopted much of the culture of Egypt but ruled only the northern part of Egypt whilst the south remained under the control of the native rulers. In their religious worship they showed preference to

certain deities such as Set, but they did not suppress the other gods. “The title given to Joseph’s father-in-law, priest of On, is interesting. On is the Egyptian city ... Heliopolis ... the centre of worship of the sun god Re”.<sup>vi</sup> Whether this priest was a priest of Re or the preferred Hyksos deity, Set, is not known.

It seems that it was a Hyksos monarch whom Joseph became an interpreter of dreams (Gen 41:14-37) and who ceded land to Joseph in Goshen (Gen 47:6). As such, the new king mentioned in Ex 1:8 would have been a native Egyptian monarch of the New Kingdom. He would have reversed the validity of any land claims by the Israelites and others.

Customs of Joseph’s experiences are related to the Hyksos: eg the chariot (unknown in Egypt until the appearance of these Asiatics), the ring and the way of treating the Pharaoh are Hyksos customs.<sup>vii</sup> (The term used for "overseers" that Joseph uses when talking to Pharaoh is an Aramaic title).

The Hyksos peoples, from all accounts, were very innovative – these innovations were to prove very useful in later on in Egyptian history. The *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* summarises these:

“Until this time Egypt had been technologically backward in comparison to with the Near East ... Among the new techniques were bronzeworking ... an improved potters wheel and the vertical loom; hum-backed cattle (zebu) and new vegetable and fruit crops; the horse and chariot, composite bows, and new shapes of scimitar and other weapons ... new musical instruments ... and ... dances”.<sup>viii</sup>

According to *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment*,

“Coming from the northeast, the Hyksos were basically Semitic, but their leaders seemed to be **Aryans**, and possibly some Hurrians. Manetho describes them as savage destroyers. He called them “Shepherd Kings,” but in Egyptian the name means “rulers of foreign lands”.

The Hyksos conquered Egypt about 1720 B.C. They soon put Semites in official positions and seemed to have some kind of relationship with the Habiru, or Apiru/Aperu in the Egyptian language. Two of the Hyksos leaders had the names Jacob-el and Jacob-baal. Joseph and the migration of Jacob’s family to Egypt may have taken place early during the Hyksos rule of Egypt”.<sup>ix</sup> [emphasis mine]

Other scholars note that name Jaqob-bar (a name akin to Jacob) was a fairly common name of the Hyksos period<sup>x</sup> which gives further credence to the relationship between the Israelites and Aramaeans.

Cyrus Gordon in *The Ancient Near East*:

“The Hyksos hordes included **Indo-European** warriors [an Aryan ethnic group which included Hittites and Mitanni in the Near East]. With the Indo-Europeans the horse, effectively used for pulling the war chariot, entered the Near East and revolutionized the art of warfare. The Iranian plateau was to become a great stamping ground of the Aryans (as we may call the segment of the Indo-Europeans to which the Iranians belong).”<sup>xi</sup> [emphasis mine]

So, from this we may deduce that the ruling class and many of the peoples comprising the Hyksos were European in racial stock (ie called Indo-European or Aryan by historians).

Because they were unable to quell Egyptian nationalistic feelings, the Hyksos formed an alliance with the Nubian Kingdom of Kush to contain the Egyptians. Even so, the city of Thebes in southern Egypt commenced a war which resulted in the expulsion of the Hyksos by Ahmose I.<sup>xii</sup> (Moses is a form of Ahmose)

## Who were the Hyksos Apiru?

The Bible and secular history make mention of a people called the Apiru, Khabiru, Hapiru or Hebrews who were in the Middle East prior to the Exodus. Who were they ?

Let us first notice the pertinent scriptures :

“Moreover the Hebrews that were with the Philistines before that time ... turned to be with the Israelites” (I Sam. 14:21).

“And Jonathan smote the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet, throughout all the land, saying, ‘Let the Hebrews hear’ ...

“And some of the Hebrews went over Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead” (I Sam. 13:3,7).

These are not Israelite Hebrews, but different Hebrews altogether<sup>xiii</sup> who descend from Eber, grandson of Arphaxad.<sup>xiv</sup>

They are first mentioned c.2000 BC where they are found wandering all over the Near East: Alakh, Amarna, Boghazkoy, Babylon, Larsa, Mari, Nuzi, Ugarit and Palestine. The Khabiru appear to have been mercenaries fighting for the Hittites and Hurrians<sup>xv</sup>. There was even a valley of Habur between Euphrates and the Tigris. Ethnically they were Indo-Europeans of the same stock as the Hittites and the Hurrians<sup>xvi</sup>. Apparently they were concentrated in the general area from where Abram came from<sup>xvii</sup> - Northern Syria/Northern Mesopotamia<sup>xviii</sup>. Many of their names are Hurrian (Indo-European), and being with the Hurrians may be the reason for Palestine being known as “the land of Huru”<sup>xix</sup>.

Later, many of them were allies of the Aramaeans and helped them rule northern Egypt as we have seen.

## Did Joseph marry an Egyptianitess?

This is what we are told:

“Gen 41:44 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, *I am* Pharaoh, and without *a word* from you, no man shall lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.

Gen 41:45 And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-paaneah. And he gave him Asenath, the daughter of Potipherah, priest of On, for his wife. And Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.” (see also 46:20, 34)

It does not state that she was an Egyptian at all. Now, given that On was in the Goshen area where the Hyksos and their aristocracy settled, it is reasonable to assume that he married into that stock for the Egyptians proper were driven southwards.

Although her name is Egyptian, remember that most Black Americans, for example, have names of Whites, so a name itself is not proof for her being a Black Egyptian. Note Ex 2:16-19 where Moses is called an Egyptian for example.

The Aramaeans were closely akin to the Hebrews. Aram is a son of Shem (Genesis 10:22). The Israelites were even taught to say "A Syrian (Aramaean) ready to perish was my father" (Deuteronomy 26:5). In Genesis 24 and 29 we find that the kinship of the Hebrews and Arameans was cemented by the marriage of Isaac with Rebekah, the sister Aramaean, Laban; and later of Jacob with his daughters. In I Chronicles 7:14 the Israelite Manasseh marries an Aramaean woman. This

demonstrates the ethnic closeness of the descendants of Arphaxad through the generations to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with the descendants of Aram.

As we have seen, there were fair Hyksos and Aramaeans (wrongly translated as ‘Syrian’) living at the edge of Goshen, where the Israelites were later to dwell. After they were expelled, the Egyptians turned on Israel. See Deut 26:4-8 where Jacob is called an Aramaean because of the close association with them (and the Hyksos).

Why did Israel live in the area of Goshen and not further south?:

Lev 20:24 “But I have said to you, You shall inherit their land, and I, I am giving it to you to possess it, a land that flows with milk and honey. I *am* Jehovah your God, who has separated you from the nations.” (compare Acts 17:26)

It was under the Hyksos, ethnically related to Joseph, that he rose to prominence and his wife must have been of this stock<sup>xx</sup>. After the Hyksos were overthrown and expelled from Egypt, Israel fell from favour and was enslaved. Today the Khabiru are probably in northern Europe, with other descendants of Abraham or northern Germany or even perhaps Denmark. A prophecy in Numbers appears to suggest the possibility of Eber being located close to Assur<sup>xxi</sup>

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### Suggested Reading

- Aling, CF (1981) *Egypt and Bible History. From Earliest Times to 1000 B.C.* Baker Book House, Michigan.
- Baines, J (1984) *Atlas of Ancient Egypt.* Phaiden Press, Oxford.
- Malek, J
- Bimson, JJ (1981) *Redating the Exodus and Conquest.* The Almond Press, Sheffield.
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- Pfeifer, CF (1966) *Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology. The Biblical World.* Pickering & Inglis, London.
- Phillips, G (1998) *Act of God.* Pan Books, London.
- Rohl, D (1995) *A Test of Time. The Bible – From Myth to History.* Arrow Books, London.
- Stump, KW (1988) “Pharaohs of the Time of the Exodus”, *Good News*, March-April: 14-17.
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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> David Rohl in his *A Test of Time* has a very interesting explanation:

“There is one possible biblical reference to Egypt’s Hyksos oppressors and this occurs in the Psalms.

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He (i.e. God) loosed the full heat of his anger, fury, rage and destruction by sending **evil angels** against them (i.e. the Egyptians). [Psalm 78:49-50]

... The correct Hebrew for 'evil angels' is malakhim-roim ... The phrase 'king-shepherds' in Biblical Hebrew is malakhei-roim!" (page 288)

<sup>ii</sup> Phillips 1998: 190, 199, 200

<sup>iii</sup> Harrison 1970: 114

<sup>iv</sup> Roux 1982 : 248; Ex. 12:37; Gen. 47:6, 11

<sup>v</sup> Wiseman: 1973 : 224

<sup>vi</sup> Aling: 1981:46

<sup>vii</sup> Livingston: 1974: 153

<sup>viii</sup> Baines and Malek 1984:42. Ian Wilson explains:

“While the Egyptians had old-fashioned solid wood bows, and had been somewhat backward in metallurgy for the manufacture of battleaxes and the like, the Hyksos had not only the much more powerful composite bow but also better made, better designed weapons of close combat and a revolutionary innovation for striking terror into enemy foot-soldiers, the horse-drawn chariot”.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>ix</sup> Livingston: 1974: 26. See also Hallo & Simpson 1971: 251

<sup>x</sup> Wilson 1985: 64

<sup>xi</sup> Gordon 1965: 280

<sup>xii</sup> See Stump 1988:14-17 and many other articles and books on the subject

<sup>xiii</sup> Roux: 1982 : 221. Pfeiffer: 1966 : 223

<sup>xiv</sup> Noorbergen: 1978 : 81; Wiseman: 1973 : XVIII; Gayre; 1973: 26; Cottrell: 1975 : 165

<sup>xv</sup> Wiseman: 1973; 8-9; Gayre: 1973 : 26.

<sup>xvi</sup> Douglas : 1972 : 511

<sup>xvii</sup> Roux : 1982 : 221

<sup>xviii</sup> Gayre: 1973 : 26, Roux : 1982 : 221.

<sup>xix</sup> Wiseman: 1973 : 8-9, 225

<sup>xx</sup> Gen. 46 : 20.

<sup>xxi</sup> Num. 24:24