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**THE STRAW, THE BRICK, AND THE METAPHOR:  
IN THE NARRATIVES IN THE BOOK OF EXODUS**

**ABSTRACT** Mud-brick, widely used in Egyptian architecture, became one of the symbols of the hard labour of the Israelites in ancient Egypt, assuming the metaphorical significance in the biblical narrative recounting the events related to the Exodus. The resulting text refers specifically to this category of building material and its metaphorical, symbolic meaning.

Key words: mud-brick, metaphor, Israelites in Egypt

**ABSTRAKT** Cegła mułowa stosowana powszechnie w architekturze Egiptu stała się jednym z symboli ciężkiej pracy Izraelitów w starożytnym Egipcie, przyjmując metaforyczną symbolikę w narracji biblijnej, relacjonującej wydarzenia związane z Eksodusem. Poniższy tekst odnosi się właśnie do tej kategorii materiału budowlanego i jego metaforycznego znaczenia.

Mud-brick<sup>1</sup> as a building material, was regularly used in the architecture of Ancient Egypt and has a very long tradition.<sup>2</sup> However, what interests us here is its significance in the Biblical context of the narrative in the Book of Exodus. In this context, the use of mud-brick symbolized hard labour and represented the image of oppression imposed by the pharaoh and his court.<sup>3</sup>

In the general view, the problems surrounding the history of the Israelites in Egypt<sup>4</sup> give rise to lively debates and disputes on various matters and aspects. One such topic of interest is the study of brick-making<sup>5</sup> by the Hebrews in the eastern part of Egypt, specifically in the Nile Delta.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this article is to refer some proposals regarding mud-brick as archaeological evidence, artifacts,

and their metamorphic meaning in the narratives found in the Book of Exodus.

(Exodus 1.11-14)<sup>7</sup>: “So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses<sup>8</sup> as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly”.

The hard labour to which the Israelites were subjected did not bring the expected effect. For the more oppressed the people were, the more they multiplied, and the result was a growing hatred on the part of the Egyptians. Which, in my opinion, cannot be categorically ruled out, namely that we are dealing with the formulation of a distinctive position, legible for later recipients, meaning or marking separateness. It should be noted that the material at our disposal from the areas of Egypt, although unevenly distributed over time, indicates

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<sup>1</sup> Although ‘mud brick’ is the term most often used in Egyptology, ‘adobe’ has more widespread currency. The Ancient Egypt word for mud brick is *djebet*. Kemp, 2009: 79-80; See also: Reich, 1992: 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> Kemp, 2009: 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> About the making of mud brick, see Kemp, 2009: 83-84.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffmeier, 1999; Hoffmeier, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Kitchen, 1976: 137

<sup>6</sup> Hoffmeier, 2014: 55. On the literary context, see, i.a: Lemański, 2014: 283-289.

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<sup>7</sup> Walton, Matthews, 1997: 85-86.

<sup>8</sup> Redford, 1963: 401-418; Kitchen, 1976: 146-147; Schlögl, 2009: 222-224; Hoffmeier, 2005: 53-65; Hoffmeier, 2014: 61-65; Wilkinson, 2011: 374-376.

a much greater diversity in relations with foreigners in everyday life.<sup>9</sup> Throughout its history, Egypt has welcomed and assimilated outsiders, especially considering the possibility of using them either in agriculture or in construction work.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the assimilation taking place in many spheres, including religious practices, may suggest that interactions with newcomers were generally accepted and not subject to wider controversy.



Fig. 1. Fragments of Mud-brick pylon, the Great Aten Temple. Photo by author

The problem of the Israelites' stay in Egypt<sup>11</sup> and the historicity of this event<sup>12</sup> is the subject of number of, often extreme suggestions, hypotheses, and statements. Especially regarding the historicity of the Exodus itself and the reconstruction of the Israelites' route of passage, as well as determining or specifying the chronological framework. For example, the Polish scholar Adam Łukaszewicz points out that discussion about the historicity of the exodus from Egypt is a difficult matter to resolve, in the absence of sources other than the biblical story.<sup>13</sup> However, he further suggests that most scholars take the position that the Exodus could be associated with the period at the end of the reign of the kings of the nineteenth dynasty (1295-1069 BC). A. Łukaszewicz, referring to the Manetho<sup>14</sup> tradition concerning the Exodus, points out that it refers to the times of the beginning of

the New Kingdom<sup>15</sup> and, in his opinion, that it is associated with the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps it should also be assumed that we are dealing with several "exits", that were later consolidated into one tradition.<sup>17</sup> However, when attempting to reconstruct the presence of the Israelites in Pharaonic Egypt, it should be noted, as suggested by the Biblical scholars N.M. Sarna and H. Shanks, that the Biblical narratives about the Exodus, does have some historical basis. Both the period of stay and captivity did indeed occur, and the determination of their historicity does not solely rely on textual analysis or archaeological discoveries, but also on common sense. As Sarna and Shanks have pointed, no nation could invent and faithfully transmit, century after century and millennium after millennium, such an infamous and distributing tradition of its own if it did not have an authentic historical core.<sup>18</sup> Donald Redford has noted that "Despite the lateness and unreliability of the story in Exodus, no one can deny that the tradition of Israel's coming out of Egypt was one of long-standing. It is found in early poetry (e.g., Exod. 15) and is constantly alluded to by the prophets."<sup>19</sup> The German historian and Egyptologist, Jan Assmann noted that the "Exodus myth may have integrated [...] various memories into a coherent story that is fictional as to its composition but historical as to some of its components."<sup>20</sup> In another article, Assman pointed out "This is not to say that there is no historical background at all behind the story of the Exodus from Egypt and that it is futile to investigate all possible sources. On the contrary, it is quite probable that a great many historical experiences and memories lie behind and went into the Biblical story though certainly not this one gigantic and miraculous event of liberation, election, and revelation."<sup>21</sup> The French Egyptologist Nicholas Grimal has pointed out that the absence of any mention of the Exodus of the Jewish people in Egyptian sources should

<sup>15</sup> Petrovich, 2006: 81-110.

<sup>16</sup> Łukaszewicz, 2020: 56; Sarna 1986: 69, see also Sarna, Shanks, 2007: 95-98; see: Hoffmeier, 2012: 37; Finkelstein, Silberman, 2002: 54-56; Joseph, *CA*, I, 14, §§ 73-92.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkinson, 2011: 376.

<sup>18</sup> Sarna, Shanks, 2007: 74.

<sup>19</sup> Redford, 1993: 412.

<sup>20</sup> Assmann, 2014: 26-25; see Chapter II of Jan Assmann's (Assmann 2014: 25-42), *Myth and History of the Exodus: Triumph and Trauma*. Also, Assmann 2015: 3-15. See also: Liverani, 2010: 288-293.

<sup>21</sup> Assmann 2015: 4.

<sup>9</sup> Kemp, 2018: 26.

<sup>10</sup> Kemp, 2018: 29.

<sup>11</sup> Hoffmeier, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Redford, 1993; Halpern, 1993: 89-96; Méléze-Modrzejewski, 2000: 17-35; Hoffmeier, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Łukaszewicz, 2020: 56. LeMon, 2022: 247-248; Lemanski, 2014: 279-311.

<sup>14</sup> Łukaszewicz, 2007: 319-320; About Manetho and Exodus, see Raspe, 1998: 124-155.

not be particularly surprising. As he pointed out, they had no reason to assign the same significance to his event as the Hebrews did.<sup>22</sup> It should be added that much information that we have about life in Egypt of the second millennium B.C. shows the possibility of context of the Israelites' stay in Egypt.<sup>23</sup> This includes accounts of their hard labour and brick-making, which is particularly relevant considering the widespread use of mud-brick architecture, especially in the Delta region.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, one of the prominent examples is the paintings found in the tomb of the Vizir of Upper Egypt, Rekhmire (TT100) which dates back to the mid-Eighteenth Dynasty, to the reign of Thutmose III (XV B.C., ca. 1460).<sup>25</sup> These wall-paintings are often referred to as they depict the process of manufacturing mud-brick<sup>26</sup>, an activity that was widely propagated.<sup>27</sup> As the British Egyptologist and Archaeologist, Barry Kemp has written, in the [...] brick making scene the labour used is explicitly identified as being foreign captives [...].<sup>28</sup> Mud-brick is a popular building material due to its easy availability and excellent technological qualities. A number of architectural structures constructed using mud-brick did not require long-term preparation or planning,<sup>29</sup> allowing for the inclusion of various individuals, including Egyptians, as well as prisoners. We can assume that the presence of the Israelites in Egypt and their involvement in clay and brick works resembled the scenes depicted in the painting, where two workers are shown mixing clay with hoes and water, while others are seen placing clay in moulds, and additional workers are involved in setting up or transporting bricks.<sup>30</sup> The text on the right is very important: "The captives which His Majesty brought away for the works of the temple of [Amūn]," and the left of the middle of the text reads "making bricks to build anew the workshop [of Amūn] in Karnak."<sup>31</sup> In addition to the imposed limit on bricks, the Israelites

were instructed to find straw<sup>32</sup> themselves (Exodus 5:6-14), following Moses' request to Pharaoh that the people of Israel be given three days to celebrate and offer their due sacrifice to God (Exodus 5:2-4).<sup>33</sup>

Evidence from Egypt does indicate the existence of such limits. For instance, a document from the Louvre (1274 B.C.) reveals a shortfall in the prescribed norm, potentially supporting the information contained in the biblical narrative. Kenneth Kitchen, a British biblical scholar, and historian specializing in the Ancient Near Eastern history, conducted a study analyzing various documents related to brick production, and noted that the available data remains inconclusive and unclear regarding the specific expectations or daily norms.<sup>34</sup> In this point, one can find a relation element in the background of the biblical story that seems rational. It should be also, assumed that the Israelites were forced to engage in other activities, such as hard labour in the fields (Exodus 1:14).<sup>35</sup> As James K. Hoffmeier, an American scholar who argues for the historicity of the Exodus, has pointed out, this particularly theme is often overlooked by researchers in the context of other biblical Israelite activities. Hoffmeier highlights that tomb decorations including paintings, clearly depict foreigners, including prisoners of war, grazing cattle or doing various field work, working in vineyards or operating the wine press.<sup>36</sup>

No doubt the story of the failure to deliver straw to Israelite mud-brick workers in Egypt has acquired and added significance, indicating prejudice,<sup>37</sup> because, as Barry Kemp points out, "The Old-Testament story of the failure of straw deliveries of the Israelite brickmakers while resident in Egypt [...] has given added significance to the practice (although, since others forms of temper

<sup>22</sup> Grimala, 2004: 268.

<sup>23</sup> Sarna, 1986:74-76; Sarna, Shanks, 2007: 75-78.

<sup>24</sup> Redford, 1993: 410, 414; Sarna 1986: 68-80.

<sup>25</sup> See Kemp, 2009: 83.

<sup>26</sup> Kemp, 2009: 83; Kitchen, 2003: 247-248.

<sup>27</sup> Walton, Matthews, 1997: 85-86.

<sup>28</sup> Kemp 2009: 83.

<sup>29</sup> Ormeling, 2016: 356; Kemp, 2009: 78-103.

<sup>30</sup> Sarna, Shanks, 2007: 77.

<sup>31</sup> N de G. Davies, *The tomb of Rekh-mi-Re at Thebes*, New York 1943: 54-55, tabl. LVIII, LIX, tab. Colour XVII. See also, Kemp, 2018: 32 fig. 1.4.; Falk, 2020: 54-57.

<sup>32</sup> The word *teben* (in the Biblical text) means 'crushed stalks, straw, chaff' (Koehler, Baumgartner, 2001: 1685). See also; Littman, Lorenzon, Silverstein, 2014: 61.

<sup>33</sup> Kitchen, 1976: 141-144.

<sup>34</sup> Kitchen, 1976: 137-147.

<sup>35</sup> Sarna, 1986: 74

<sup>36</sup> Hoffmeier, 2012: 9; Hoffmeier, 2014: 55-59; Redford, 1993: 416, no 110. James K. Hoffmeier cites the research of Ellen Moris, she "drawn attention to the numerous scenes in Eighteenth Dynasty tombs that show various foreigners working in diverse types of farm work, including tending vineyards and winemaking" (Hoffmeier, 2014: 58).

<sup>37</sup> Kemp, 2009: 82.

can be just as good, [...]).”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, despite much expert comment to the contrary, the omission of straw is still sometimes seen as producing a brick of lesser quality.<sup>39</sup> As he further remarked that, “Straw is sometimes suggested as necessary ingredient. It is not! Most adobes made with reasonable adobe soil don’t need it. If the organic content is too high, or the clay content too low, it may be necessary to add straw for strength, and for speed in drying.”<sup>40</sup> This claim, in my opinion, presents a more plausible approach to the use of straw in mud-brick production. Gathering straw from the fields, after the wheat harvest, remained a hard and tedious labour. In Egypt, straw was only delivered after the harvest, which may have hindered the construction process, as bricks could only be made during the dry seasons. In order to maintain the continuity of brick production, the chaff<sup>41</sup> had to be collected.<sup>42</sup> Robert Littman, Martha Lorenzen, Jay Silverstein, in article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, titled *With & Without Straw: How Israelite Slaves Made Bricks*, state that, “If Pharaoh did not supply the Israelites with straw, presumably from his storage units, then the search for the right chaff would have been almost impossible, which is perhaps the point of the story. The ancient reader would understand the difficulty of gathering chaff, a fact that is all but lost on the modern reader.”<sup>43</sup> At this point, we can also note, following the research of Manfred Bietak and Gary A. Rendsburg<sup>44</sup>, that an ancient Egyptian manuscript (*Papyrus Anastasi*) P. Anastasi IV 12.6 = P. Anastasi V 3.1, that dates to the reign of King Sethi II (1214-1208 B.C.), contains a complaint referring to a lack of men to form bricks, as well as indicating a lack of straw which, in the opinion of the researchers, brings to mind the biblical tradition contained in (Exodus 5:16), although we do not have, in this case, any additional information regarding the location of the mason’s task.<sup>45</sup>

Even though straw<sup>46</sup> may not be absolutely necessary, it still was an important element

in brick-making. The obstacle presented by the Egyptian authorities, particularly the pharaoh, could be interpreted by a modern readers as an expression of hostility or increasing prejudice against the Hebrews and their cults.<sup>47</sup> However, as the Polish of biblical scholar Janusz Lemański, rightly points out, when considering the backdrop of the Exodus story (1-15), it is not easy to see that the game is about whom Israel is to ‘serve’: the Pharaoh (servile service) or YHWH (cult service).<sup>48</sup>

For this reason, to sum up, it can be stated that hard labour in clay (as in making bricks), as well as restrictions imposed by the Pharaoh, who was hostile to the Hebrews, shaped religious, cultic identification and distinctiveness. So, we are dealing with a story full of metaphors in which knowledge of the elements that make up the culture of Ancient Egypt is not conclusive proof of the residence of the Israelites in the land on the Nile, but, nevertheless, undoubtedly makes it more likely. As the archaeologist Baruch Halpern noted, “Whatever the historical background of the Exodus, then, the historiographic background involved the influence both of the low and the elite traditions of Egyptian history.”<sup>49</sup> In this case, both the Ancient Egyptians and the Israelites skillfully combined a cult, idealistic set of references derived from religion, worship, and combined it with the complex, multi-layered pragmatism of the then reality. In fact, such a connection required the use of metaphor.

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<sup>38</sup> Kemp, 2009: 82; see also: Falk, 2020: 55.

<sup>39</sup> Kemp, 2009: 82.

<sup>40</sup> McHenry, 1976: 51 after B. Kemp (2009: 82). Por. Sarna, 1996: 65-66.

<sup>41</sup> The biblical treatment of chaff is both literal and figurative.

<sup>42</sup> Littman, Lorenzon, Silverstein, 2014: 60-71.

<sup>43</sup> Littman, Lorenzon, Silverstein, 2014: 63.

<sup>44</sup> Also see Redford, 1993: 206.

<sup>45</sup> Bietak, Rendsburg, 2021:29.

<sup>46</sup> Concerning the straw as a symbol of human weakness, see: Packer, Tenney, 2007: 215.

<sup>47</sup> See i.a Walton, Matthews, 1997: 90.

<sup>48</sup> Lemański, 2014: 311.

<sup>49</sup> Halpern, 1993: 93.

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