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Yaacov Shavit

SHIFTING EVALUATIONS OF ANCIENT EGYPT AND ITS PLACE IN WORLD HISTORY

Professor Yaacov Shavit teaches the History of Zionism and the History of Palestine at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including *The New Hebrew Nations: A Study in Israeli Heresy and Fantasy* (London 1982), *Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement* (London 1988), *Judaism in the Greek Mirror* (London 1994, forthcoming), and is currently working on a book about Afro-American Historical Writing. Professor Shavit moreover was editor-in-chief of the ten-volume *History of Eretz-Israel* (1979–1984).

In a children's book called *My First Trip to Africa*, published by the Institute of Karmic Guidance, (Washington, DC, 1991), a black American girl visits Egypt in quest of her identity. Among many other things she learns that the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument and the American Eagle, all are imitations of ancient Egyptian historical monuments and symbols. The girl, Tye, a name derived from Tiy, mother of the famous king Amenhotep III, decides that come next Halloween, she and her girlfriends will no longer dress up as Miss Piggy but as Nefertiti.

This somewhat naive didactic short story is only one example of a vast corpus including scholarly, popular and children's books concerning ancient Egypt which have come out in recent years. And it is only one minor manifestation of the recent controversy, which is raging mainly in Amer-

ican academic life but also among the non-academic public. The subject — the nature of ancient Egypt and its contribution to world civilization — has become a 'hot' topic generating a great deal of interest and assuming vital cultural and political importance in present-day North America. It is, of course, part of the discussion concerning the character of the U.S.A. as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society.

At the center of the academic debate stand the two monumental volumes of Martin Bernal, *Black Athena — The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, in which he describes Egypt as the main source of Greek civilization, and hence of Western civilization. Along with Bernal many African-American scholars now promote the same view, though the argument is not altogether new and can be traced back to the Senegalese scholar Cheikh

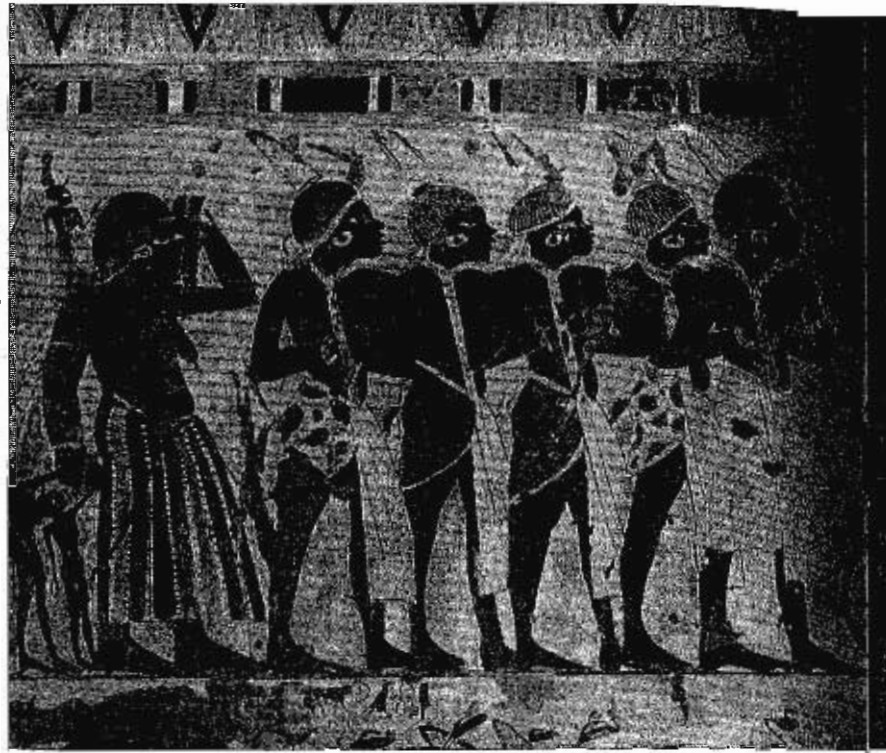
Anata Diop, and a few other pioneers in this field since the late nineteenth century — 'white' Europeans, Africans educated in France, and Afro-Americans in the U.S.

For many of them the view that Egypt was the cradle of human civilization became a credo of fate, a revelation, an historical gospel, even a scientific truth. However, from their point of view, to accept simply that ancient Egypt had attained a very high culture was not enough. It became crucial to prove that ancient Egypt had been the cradle of ancient civilization in general, and in particular the mother and teacher of Greek classical civilization — the alma mater of European civilization, and hence also of American culture. Behind this new historiography lies the conviction that nineteenth-century historiography was by and large 'racially orientated.' Its overriding belief in the Indo-

European myth and in the Indo-European 'origin of Greek culture' drove western historiography to hide the historical truth. As a result it spread a totally distorted image of ancient history with 'Orientalist' trends supporting this Eurocentric approach. To shake its foundations is therefore considered vital in the struggle against the dominance of western Orientalism and anti-Semitism alike and, where the U.S. is concerned, against the prevailing racial attitudes towards the blacks.

That ancient Egypt has acquired such importance for the black community in the U.S.A. derives from the fact that it is a community 'without a Book.' The cultural heritage of the blacks in America rests mainly on oral traditions. In contrast to the Egyptians, the Greeks, the peoples of the Ancient Near and Far East, they have neither written records of their history, nor culturo-religious scriptures of their own. Therefore, to claim that ancient Egyptian culture is an 'African culture,' not only geographically but also in essence and spirit, and that the Greek (and also the Judeo-Christian) intellectual heritage all originated in Egypt means claiming links and ownership, i.e., claiming that the Egyptian and Greek Canons are part and parcel of a living and vital African heritage. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Hermetic literature, Homer and Aesop, Plato and Aristotle, Moses and Jesus, all of them derived their ideas and wisdom from ancient Egypt.

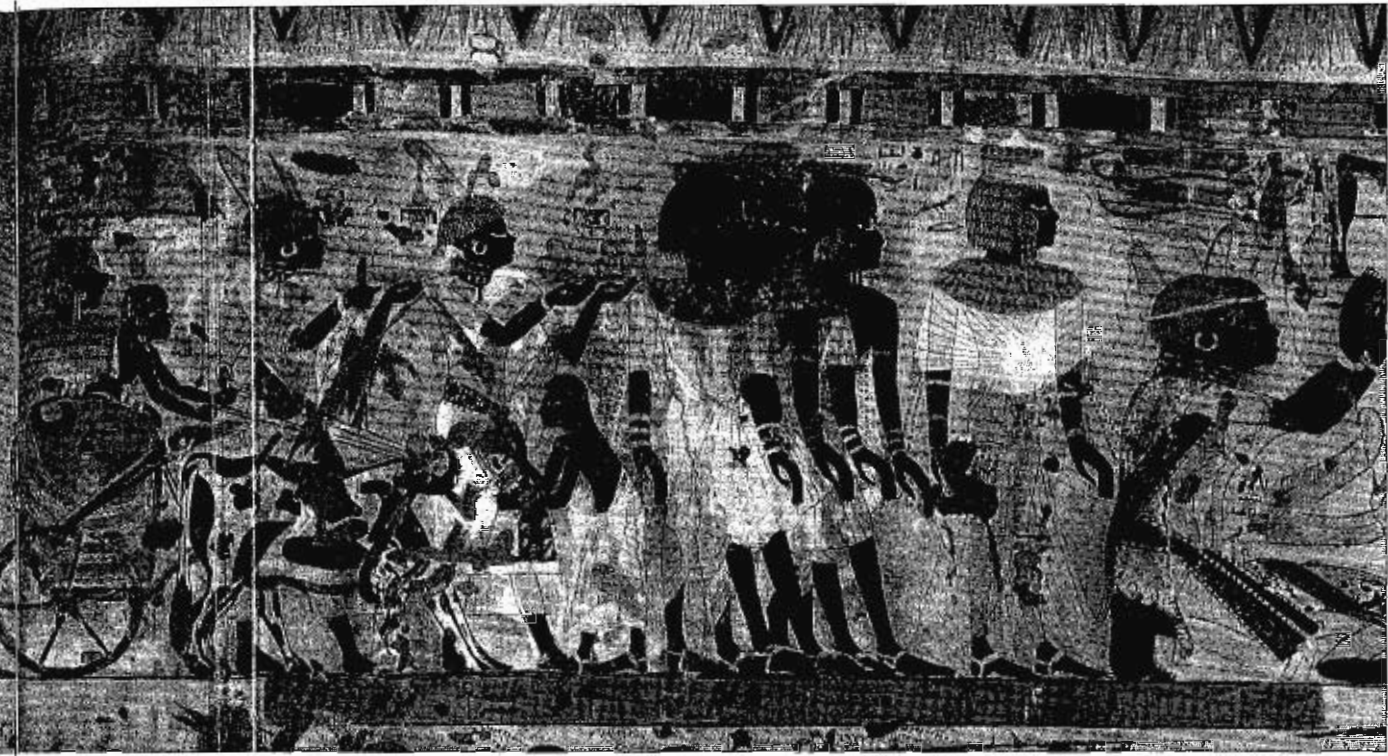
I will dwell here on two aspects of this intense and fascinating controversy, which not only reveal the great scholarship and knowledge of those involved, but also touch on some basic concepts concerning the meaning of the history of culture and the history



of ideas.

I first discuss the claim that from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War (and of Western colonialism), the image of Ancient Egypt was at a low ebb. Bernal devotes a large section of his second volume to prove his case against anti-Egyptian trends in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. In his view, the main reasons for this decline of the Egyptian image were, first, the Hellenophilism of Western culture; second the Oriental Renaissance of the Far East that followed upon the discovery and transla-

tion of ancient Persian and Indian literature; and third, the triumph of the Indo-European myth, which made it impossible for Europeans to accept the idea that 'Hamitic' Egypt was the cradle of civilization. To these we can further add the impact of the discoveries of the rich literature of Mesopotamia since the mid-nineteenth century, and the ensuing emergence of 'Semitic' and 'pan-Babylonian' myths. Excavations in Crete began in the 1870s and, therefore, coincided with the discoveries in Mesopotamia, and later in Syria (Ugarit, 1929). The cultural links between the Aegean world and the



Part of a tribute scene in the tomb of Huy, viceroy of Nubia under Tutankhamun, showing northern Nubians of high rank followed by a princess in an ox-drawn charriot, and warriors whose submission is made certain by the *sheyba* (taming stick) attached to their wrists and necks. About 1360 BCE, Tomb of Huy (T 40), Qurnet Murai, 30.4.21 (restored). From Charles K. Wilkinson and Marsha Hill, *Egyptian Wall Paintings. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Collection of Facsimiles*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1983.

'Semitic' Near East now became of major interest to scholars. On the other hand, the great discoveries in Egypt mainly took place only at the beginning of the twentieth century. This explains, to my mind, that scholars were aware of the East Mediterranean context of Aegean and Greek civilization far sooner than of the cultural contacts that existed at the same time between Egypt and the Aegean.

But is this a true picture? Is it right to argue that the nineteenth century put aside the Hellenistic and Renaissance traditions which were venerated until the late eighteenth century? We

must remember that the forefather of the notion that Egypt was the cradle of civilization and the origin of all culture, art, wisdom, science, philosophy, technology and so on was Hecataeus of Abdera, whose *On the Egyptians* was partially preserved by Diodoros. He was interested in the *origo* of human culture, and believed that Egypt was the cradle of almost every aspect of human culture. According to him, Egypt had had a great number of colonies which spread from Babylon to Athens, and which were centers of Egyptian influence. Greece's indebtedness to Egypt was manifest by the long

list of famous Greek students who had come to study in Egypt and acquired their wisdom and knowledge there:

But now (...) we must enumerate what Greeks who have won fame for their wisdom and learning visited Egypt in ancient times, in order to become acquainted with its customs and learning. For the priests of Egypt recount from their sacred records that they were visited in early times by Orpheus, Musaeus, Melapumus and Daedalus, also by the poet Homer and Lycurgus of Sparta, later by Solon of Athens and the philosopher Plato, and that there also came Pythagoras of Samos and the mathematician Eudoxus...

It is, of course, hard to believe that Egyptians priests in Thebes or Memphis were well informed as to who from among the many Greek travelers visiting them in the long run were to become 'cultural heroes back home,' in Greece. Obviously, this list was drawn up by a native Greek.

This tradition had a great many adherents during the Hellenistic period, was revived in the Middle Ages and again in the Renaissance, and again in the nineteenth century by the Jewish Enlightenment movement. In the 1920s it was widely adopted by certain intellectual circles and by public opinion in Egypt itself, while, as we have seen, today it is a corner-stone in the worldview of Afro-American academic and non-academic circles in the U.S.A. While I cannot examine here the complex process whereby this tradition and its main strategies were disseminated, for my purpose it is enough to mention some of the leading philo-Egyptians or pan-Egyptians of earlier periods.

In the fourteenth century the great historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) in his *Muqaddima* — ('Prolegomena to history') wrote that Egypt was the storehouse of wisdom, where science had been preserved for a thousand years: '[...] because the civilization greatly developed and its sedentary culture has been established for a thousand years Egyptian science was preserved while of the science of others, nothing has come to our attention.' Muslim scholars in general had no reason or intention to hide their indebtedness to Greek philosophy and, to the best of my knowledge, seldom used the Hellenistic strategy of claiming that the source of their wisdom was ancient Egypt.

In the seventeenth century the German Jesuit monk and Renaissance man, Athanasius Kiecher (1602–1680) wrote several speculative monumental studies in which he claimed that ancient Egypt was the post-diluvian cradle of all arts and sciences from China to Mexico. In his *Oedipus Aegypticus* (I–III, Rome 1652–1654) and *Obeliscus Aegypticus* (1666) and *Sphinx Mystagoga* (1676), he tried to describe in great detail the Egyptian mystical system. In many aspects he can be regarded as the first propounder of the radical pan-Egyptian heliocentric theory, even in its Afro-American version. The great interest of the Renaissance in Egypt was a result of the revived eagerness to discover the origin of culture, to arrive at universal history and at the same time offer a systematic understanding of mysticism and mysteries.

Trying to understand the uniqueness of the Homeric epic, Thomas Blackwell, in his influential study *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1731), nevertheless wrote in excited admiration about Egypt, 'the mighty kingdom,' with its 'reputation for wisdom and knowledge.'

Inevitably Egyptian culture was also seen in a negative light, owing largely to the so called 'abominations' mentioned in the Bible, viz., its cults, the so-called superstitions, ect. The Egyptian Hellenistic mystical cults were described as being part of the 'eastern flood' of mysteries which sweeping over Rome had eroded it from within. In the first universal history written in Hebrew (Vilna, 1865), based on Weber's popular *Allgemeine Weltgeschichte*, the Jewish writer followed the biblical view that 'Solomon's wisdom excelled... all the wisdom of Egypt.' Of course he did not mean that Solomon was a more potent magician than the Egyptians were, but that he

had a superior knowledge of the laws of nature.

However, the philo-Egyptian idea, the 'fascination of ancient Egypt,' with its various deep roots in the intellectual mind of the 'West', from Alexander the Great to the beginning of the nineteenth century, was widely accepted, and was the conventional — in many cases the speculative — wisdom of many. One may conclude by saying that two different attitudes, both deeply rooted in Western tradition, prevailed at the same time.

Now, did this positive image really decline during the nineteenth century?

Here, again, I can give only a few examples:

In the famous novel by Bulwer-Lytton *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the Egyptian protagonist, Abraces, is given several opportunities to praise Egypt and demean Greece and Rome:

How I could loathe you, if I did not hate — yes hate! Greek or Roman, it is from us, from the dark lore of Egypt, that ye have stolen the lore that gives you souls. Your knowledge, your poesy, your laws, your arts, your barbarous mastery of war... Ye have filched, as a slave filches the fragments of the feast, from us ... The Pyramids look down no more on the race of Ramses — the eagle hovers over the serpent of the Nile.

And later Abraces continues the same line of thought:

From Egypt came all the knowledge of the world; from Egypt came the lore of Athens and the profound policy of Crete; from Egypt came those early and mysterious tribes which (long before the hordes of Romulus swept over the plains of Italy, and in the eternal cycle of events drove back civilization into barbarism and darkness) possessed all the arts of wisdom and the graces of intellectual life... For modern nations owe their greatness to Egypt.

The same view was expressed by Mark Twain. Here, at the sight of the Pyramids, he lost his skepticism and irony (*The Innocents Abroad or the new Pilgrim's Progress*):

We were glad to have seen the land which was the mother of civilization — which taught Greece her letters and through Greece Rome and through Rome the World (...) that land which knew, three thousand years ago, well-nigh all of medicine and surgery which science has discovered lately; which had all those curious surgical instruments which science has invented recently.

But perhaps the most illuminating example is the great novel of Thomas Mann, *Joseph und Seine Brüder*, which he published during 1933–1943 and which may be seen as a summary of nineteenth-century scholarship and its approach to the nature of ancient Egypt. Mann's novel really deserves a separate lecture, but in it the reader can find the basic dual or ambivalent attitude toward Egypt: where its religion is concerned the novel paints a negative image, but at the same time ancient Egypt is considered to be the most advanced civilization that existed in ancient times. Here, indeed, we find the fundamentals of the different approaches: the 'religious approach' of those who were mainly interested in the evolution of religion and fate, and the more 'secular' approach of those who were interested rather in the evolution of science and philosophy.

The English historian H.T. Buckle, in his *Introduction to the History of Civilization*, portrays Egypt as an ancient theocratic-despotic civilization, a description which fits his historical scheme of human progress and, mocks works in which Egyptian science is praised: 'It is a shame that such nonsense should still be written in the nineteenth century...', a statement which hints that the dominancy

of the philo-Egyptian approach still prevailed in European literature in the mid-nineteenth century.

From a 'secular' point of view the detractors downgraded its contribution to the development of science by remarking on the practical-utilitarian nature of Egyptian science when compared to the theoretical character of Greek science. The Indo-Europeans were regarded as the creators of myth and literature, but not of science. Here it is important to recall that until the mid-nineteenth century scholars of course had access to only a small number of Egyptian texts. Following the discovery of a vast array of scientific texts in the following generations, modern research became fully aware of the accomplishments of ancient Egyptian science, notably in medicine, astronomy and geometry, not to mention its wisdom literature.

What, then, are the traces of the 'racial' attitude that Bernal finds in modern western Egyptology? There is for example, Breasted's view that the Egyptians did not have a terminology for expressing abstract thought, for which, unlike the Greek, they never developed the capacity. They thought in concrete pictures, argued the great American Egyptologist, and for Bernal this is a solid proof of the man's biases (1, 274). However, the ancient Egyptians, would not in the slightest have considered Breasted's interpretation as an insult or degradation!

The rapid advance of Egyptology from the end of the nineteenth century until the Second World War (the Egyptian Exploration Fund, later Egyptian Exploration Society, was established in 1883), was marked by astonishing discoveries which only served to strengthen the positive image of ancient Egypt. Modern western Egyptology (*misrulujiyyaat*) has been enthusiastically welcomed in Egypt

itself and has had a great influence. Egyptian scholars have not found in western Egyptology any kind of racial outlook or negative attitudes toward the ancient Egyptians.

Thus, in contrast to the picture drawn by Bernal and part of the Afro-American literature, for nineteenth-century Europe Egypt was a *sui generis* civilization with great achievements in almost every sphere of life. This does not mean, of course, that Egypt was automatically also perceived as an 'ancient paradise.'

At this point it seems to me useful to quote an extract from the Jewish-German historian Heinrich Graetz in his well-known 'Correspondence with an English Lady on Judaism and Christianity':

An Egyptologist ... once whispered to me that he had read somewhere about Jehovah in an Egyptian papyrus, that monotheism was in fact the invention of the priest of the Egyptian god Amen-Ra. Others insist that the unity of God was taught in the esoteric Greek mysteries....

Of the German Egyptologists' apparent desire to grant ancient Egypt the priority in the history of the monotheistic ideas and wrest it from the Semites, Graetz remarked:

I place no great worth on this objection, for unlike the field of inventions, in matters of faith the question of who was the first is unimportant. What counts is the strength of the commitment

While Graetz's distinction between religion and inventions (culture) is an interesting one, for our purpose his somewhat sarcastic remarks are important since they prove (1) that in many academic circles Egypt was regarded as the source of the idea of monotheism — an attribution that for many, but not for every, German scho-

lar shows high respect, (2) that pan-Egyptianism, like pan-Babylonism (the Babel und Bibel school) could have anti-Semitic implications, and (3) there exists, indeed, a very meaningful and essential difference between 'religious ideas' about the universe and 'religion.'

In contrast to this view, Ernest Renan, in a chapter about the 'Influence of Egypt upon Israel,' in his *The History of the People of Israel* (1888, I) believed that the Israelites adapted several Egyptian customs and manners, such as circumcision, but that in respect to the pure nomadic religion of the Israelites, it 'altered it in many respects for the worse.' It was Egypt that originated the golden calf, the brazen serpent, the lying oracles: 'with the exception of the ark, Egypt introduced nothing but disturbing elements...'

Renan was a very popular scholar and very influential. Nevertheless, there were others who wished to present an evolutionist approach to the genesis of mythology and religion. During the second half of the nineteenth century a vast corpus of studies and collections were published about world mythologies, the meaning of myth, its diffusion, its structure, etc. Thus, on the basis of the theories of Lang and Müller, the 'masters of mythology' in the second half of the nineteenth century, an English scholar, a nineteenth-century Kircher, Gerald Massey, in several voluminous books such as *The Book of the Begin-*

nings (a tour de force of modern speculation and imagination) claim to have found the source and origin of almost every mythological motif or idea in ancient Egyptian literature including Jesus, who was crucified in Egypt (as is written in *Revelation*): Jesus as judge of the dead, with the sheep on the right, and the goat on the left, is Egyptian from first to last, in every phase from the beginning to the end.

Obviously, we can find Massey quoted as an authority in many atheistic publications, but at the same time he is also considered as the forefather of the African-American school, even by many fundamentalists.

The fascinating and troublesome fact concerning the various theories that Egypt is the origin of almost every invention, idea, philosophy or religion, is that Egypt is portrayed as a cosmos of variety and diversity and not as an homogenous culture, a clear ideal-type. Plato and Aristotle, Moses and Jesus, mysteries and rational thinking, moral wisdom, — all different and contradicting trends of thought — were influenced or inspired by Egypt or even are mere imitations of its cultural-intellectual heritage; European intellectual achievements are ultimately founded on Egyptian wisdom.

In my view only a simplistic viewpoint could see the Egyptian intellectual tradition as the primeval source for such radically different ideas, doctrines and religions, as Plato's speculative idealism and Aristotle's inductive

approach. Judaism and Christianity, Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, the Kabbala and the rationalism of the Renaissance and the scientific revolution of the modern era.

It is ironic that those who have set out to prove that Egypt was a miracle and to claim Egyptian superiority in every field also argue that the Greeks were incapable of progress without imitating or even stealing the intellectual property of others. And there is more to it than that. Those who try to diminish the Greek achievement and glory by reminding us that in Athens slave power was exploited, or that peaceful Athens was an Empire that exploited its neighbours, and therefore ought to be condemned rather than praised, are the same people who glorify ancient Egypt who also used slave-power and established an empire by conquering large parts of Asia, and perhaps even of the Aegean region. What we have here is, of course, a double standard. As historians we must understand Greece and Egypt in the context of their time, and not exchange one grand theory, that of Pan-Indo-Europeanism, with a new one, Pan-Egyptianism. We must study them both as different civilizations, which had different types of interrelation, in reality and in the imaginary world, but were not dependent on each other. Only thus can we arrive at the true picture of Ancient Egypt as a unique great civilization.