

## DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Fourteenth Week - Monday

### HARD BONDAGE

*"And Yahweh said: 'I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites'" (Exodus 3:7,8).*

When we read of the numerous facts and incidents pictorially registered in the monuments of Egypt and understand that some of them can be traced up to the time of Moses, the question naturally arises whether we may not hope to find among them some record of the events connected with the residence of the Israelites in the land of Egypt and their departure from it.

As the principal and most ancient monuments of this kind are in Upper Egypt, we should not look for any memorials of that portion of public history with which the name of Joseph is connected, because that history belongs to Lower Egypt, which was not then under the same crown with the upper country. Neither should we expect to find any record of the remarkable circumstances connected with the plagues of Egypt and the exodus of the Israelites; for although the upper and lower countries were then under one crown, and although such events as the death of the firstborn and the overthrow in the Red Sea were of sufficient national importance for such commemoration, we do not find that nations (and certainly not the Egyptians!) manifest any readiness to perpetuate their own dishonor. But if there are any circumstances of Israel's sojourn in that country that tends to exalt the glory and power of Egypt, of that we might not unreasonably expect to find some trace on the monuments.

Accordingly, the only representation which has been supposed by the students of Egyptian antiquity to have any reference to the Israelites exhibits them in the state of oppression and humiliation, when it became the policy of the new dynasty from Upper Egypt, "which knew not Joseph" and his services, to depress the Hebrew population and reduce them to a servile condition by making "their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field."

This representation, which has been regarded with great interest by scholars and travelers, is

found painted on the walls of a tomb at Thebes. A copy and explanation of it was first furnished by the distinguished Italian professor Rosellini in his great work on the monuments of Egypt. His account of it is headed, "Explanation of a picture representing the Hebrews as they were engaged making brick." In this picture some of the laborers are employed in transporting the clay in vessels, some in working it up with the straw, others taking the bricks out of the molds and setting them in rows to dry, while others are seen carrying away the bricks already dried, done by means of a yoke upon their shoulders from which ropes were suspended at each end. Among the supposed Hebrews are four Egyptians, very distinguishable by their figure and color. Two of them, one sitting and the other standing, carry a stick in their hand, superintending the laborers and seemingly ready to fall upon two other Egyptians, who are represented as sharing the labors of the supposed Hebrews.

This scene does certainly illustrate in all points the labors of the Israelites, for we are told not only that they worked in the making of bricks, but that the bricks were compacted with straw. And that the sticks of the taskmasters were no idle insignia of authority is shown by the complaints of the Israelites: "There is no straw given to your servants, and they say to us, make bricks. And behold, your servants are beaten" (Ex. 5:16).

This picture is found at Thebes in the tomb of a person called Roscheré. The question hence arises as to how it came to be there. It is answered that Roscheré was a high court officer of the king, being overseer of the public buildings and consequently had charge of all the works undertaken by the crown. In the tomb are found other objects of a like nature--two colossal statues, a sphinx, and even the laborers who hewed the stone works which he by virtue of his office had caused to be made in his lifetime. This high officer being entombed at Thebes, any important labor in any part of the kingdom would naturally be represented there, for the kingdom was one and the whole department seems to have been under his control.

Now it is admitted that the inscription does not so expressly declare, as was at first imagined, that the bricks were made for a building at Thebes. But even were this the case, the difficulty is not insuperable. It is true that during their bondage the Israelites occupied their ancient home (so far as they were allowed to enjoy a home) in Goshen, which was far distant from Thebes; but we know of nothing in Scripture or elsewhere that would confine their labors to Goshen. On the contrary, when they were ordered to find straw for themselves we read, "So the people were scattered abroad *throughout all the land of Egypt.*" This certainly does not convey the idea that they were making bricks in Goshen only.

From other testimony there is indeed reason to suppose that the Israelites, under overseers, were sent out in gangs or classes that would necessarily relieve each other; and thus there can be no objection to the opinion that some of these gangs may have been sent even so far as Thebes. We may be certain that no humane considerations were likely to prevent this among such a people as the Egyptians. Indeed, they were apprehensive due to the large number of Israelites, and so to scatter them in small bodies over all Egypt would seem most practicable. Upon the whole, then, although positive certainty cannot be attained, there is nothing to render

it improbable that these brick-makers were really Israelites, and that they are represented in the execution of the very labors which the Scripture commemorates.

Concerning the complexion depicted in the picture, it is such as the Egyptian artists usually give to the natives of Syria. The dress, however, might afford some further evidence, as the artists were very particular in preserving the details of costume. Now the figures are represented as unclad except for the short trousers or apron that they wore at their labor. It may be doubted, however, whether after such a long residence in Egypt (which was indeed the native country of all the Israelites at that time) they had preserved the style of dress which the single family of Jacob had brought from Canaan. It is far more likely that they had by this time conformed to the habits of the country, which were better suited to the climate than any dress of their ancestors from the less fervid climate of Syria.

This in part also meets the objection that has been made to the lack of beards in these figures; for these men are not to be regarded as strangers come freshly to Egypt with all their foreign usages about them but as tribes long settled in the country, having adopted of necessity many of the customs. We have already had occasion to notice (Twelfth Week Saturday) that the Egyptians compelled their servants of whatever nation to shave their beards. Upon the whole, we see no reason why the reader should deny himself the satisfaction of believing that in this scene he contemplates a representation by Egyptian artists of the very scene which the Sacred Books describe.