

# Egypt On The Pentateuchs Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israels Identity

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*Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map*

in Gen. 41 is not primarily a mirror of some actual existing practice, but is a finely designed literary construct in which historical accuracy is subordinated to the logic or ideology of the narrative.

This conclusion is emblematic of a realization that, through their literary rhetoric, biblical texts construct the world to which they also respond. 'Egypt' in the Pentateuch, in this view, then, is not only or primarily a pointer to a determinate location or people, but functions more as a multi-valent metaphor or symbol in which the geographic or ethnographic referent is overdetermined by the values or ideology of the producers of the document.<sup>21</sup> The interpretation of the biblical text that follows from this perspective displaces the referential concern with a concern for the biblical text's own rhetoric and ideology, resulting in quite a different biblical geography—one that takes into account the symbolic meanings of place and space.<sup>22</sup> And, in fact, there have been a spate of studies on various biblical texts that speak of "symbolic topography" (Görg 1981c), "symbolic geography" (Wyatt 1987), "ideological geography" (Jobling 1986), "narrative geography" (Deurloo 1990), "geographically dressed-up theology" (Niemann 1994), and so on.<sup>23</sup>

are similar across a broad cultural area throughout the world. Hence the parallels say no more than that the investiture narrated here is similar to many others known from elsewhere' (1986: 94).

21. On symbols, see Ollenburger (1987: 18-21). The technical term 'overdetermination', borrowed from psychoanalysis, indicates here a linguistic formation that acts as a vehicle for a number of different meanings and associations, each having its own coherence at a particular level of interpretation. My argument is that the ideological valuation of the geographic and ethnographic referents in the Hebrew Bible, by the producers of the text, on the level of the text's rhetoric, overshadows the simple denotative meaning of these terms.

22. Precursors for this sort of symbolic geography can be found in investigations of the various notions of space in the ancient Near East, particularly in Egypt and particularly in pictorial representations. See Brunner-Traut (1990), Baud (1989), Keel (1977), Leclant (1969), Duchesne-Guillemin (1969), Cassin (1969), Brunner (1954-56, 1957), Groenewegen-Frankfort (1987).

23. J. Levenson has written: "we must not understand Biblical geography as a statement of a scientific nature. Rather, to the unscientific mind of Israel...geography is simply a visible form of theology" (1985: 116). Carroll speaks of the "symbolic geography" whose ideology underwrites so much of the Hebrew Bible" (1992: 83-84), and argues forcefully that the representations of geographical space in the biblical literature on the occupation of, and exile from, the 'land' are mythic means of undergirding the specific postexilic ideologies of the Jerusalem temple. Görg speaks of the Bible's "theological" (1980) or "cultic" (1987b) geography, and argues for the symbolic

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