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The Motif of the Egyptian Bondage: Observations on its Literary Origins and its Redactional Development in the Exodus Narrative (Exod 1-15)

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SHORT PRESENTATION

The paper is dedicated to one aspect treated in my recently finished *Habilitationsschrift* on the literary development of the Exodus narrative. While it is widely assumed that the motif of the Egyptian bondage constitutes one of the cornerstones of the Exodus tradition, a redaction critical analysis of the relevant passages in Exod 1-3; 5 shows that this assumption is unfounded. In its earliest literary form, the Exodus narrative lacks any explicit reference to the enslavement of the Israelites and instead speaks of the Israelites' misery (Exod 3:7a: עני) and their oppression through the Egyptians (Exod 3:9b: לחץ). Neither of the two terms is idiomatic in the context of forced labor, but they rather denote the ill treatment of socially marginalized groups. While the precise implications of the Israelites' misery remain obscure, their oppression is most likely to be identified with Pharaoh's order to kill all of their newborn sons (Exod 1:22).

That the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians is a thought which is first explicitly expressed by the late pre-priestly author of Exod 1:11a, 12; 2:11aβ who introduces the term סבלות. It is taken up and reinterpreted by the priestly writer who speaks of the hard labor (Exod 1:14aα*: עבדה קשה) which makes the Israelites' life bitter. Interestingly, neither Exod 1:11a, 12 nor the priestly passage in Exod 1:13–14* specify any details of the forced labor. The building of the store cities (Exod 1:11b) is a later interpolation, and the same applies to the details mentioned in Exod 1:14aα_{fin}βb which both point to a post-priestly background. That the Israelites' service involved all kinds of field labor (Exod 1:14aβb) is a thought inspired by the mention of the servants in the fields (Exod 9:21) while the older notion of the Israelites working in mortar in brick (Exod 1:14aα_{fin}) has been developed in light of Gen 11:3 where the same building materials are used to construct the Tower.

The brick motif was then further developed by the author of Exod 5:6–13*, 22–23; 6:1 who describes the increasing of the burden in order to explain why the Israelites reacted with disobedience (Exod 6:9 P^G) after they at first had faithfully accepted the message of deliverance (Exod 4:31). Already in its final form including the murmuring passages in Exod 5:5, 14–20 the story has then given rise to the short note in Exod 3:7bα_{fin}β which mentions how the people suffered from the evil treatment through their supervisors. In sum, the picture of

the Egyptian bondage as it is painted by the Exodus narrative is neither original nor historically reliable. Rather, it has developed as a multi-layered literary fiction which is primarily due to the exegetical skill of learned scribes.