

## ארץ אדומה, ארץ שחורה

אבנר רמו

The ancient Egyptians referred to the desert regions on both sides of the Nile valley as: “**Deshert**” - “**the red lands.**” We may wonder, whether the Hebrews who came out of Egypt and settled in neighboring Canaan were familiar with this term.



In the Book of Exodus we are told that soon after leaving Egypt:

**ויסע משה את-ישראל מים-סוף, ויצאו אל-מדבר-שור; וילכו שלשת-ימים במדבר, ולא-מצאו מים.**

**“And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water”** (Ex 15:33).

A short time later, in a place named Rephidim water were found (Ex 17:1-6), but it appears that the inhabitant of this desert region, the Amalekites, were not so eager to share their treasured water with the newcomers: **ויבא עמלק; וילחם עם-ישראל ברפידם** - **“Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim”** (Ex 17:8).

It appears that the presence of the Amalekites in this locale continued for many years, and we read in the Book of Samuel: **ויך שאול את-עמלק מחוילה בואך שור, אשר על-פני מצרים** - **“And Saul smote the Amalekites, from Havilah as you comes to Shur, that is in front of Egypt”** (1 Sam 15:7).

We also hear about David who reigned after Saul:

ויעל דוד ואנשיו ויפשטו אל-הגשורי והגזי (והגזרי) והעמלקי: כי הנה ישבות הארץ אשר מעולם בואך שורה ועד-ארץ מצרים.

“And David and his men went up, and raided upon the Geshurites, and the Gizrites, and the Amalekites; for those were the inhabitants of the land, who were of old, as you come to Shur, and to the land of Egypt” (1 Sam 27:8).

However, the logic of this verse suggests that here הגשורי is a letter-insertion error of השורי - "the Shurite." It is also suggested that the words: כי הנה ישבות הארץ אשר מעולם is a word disorder of כי אשר מעולם הנה ישבות הארץ - “for forever they were living in that land.”

Shur is also mentioned in the Book of Genesis. We are told that when the pregnant Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid of Sarah, escaped from her abusing owner:

וימצאה מלאך יהוה על-עין המים-במדבר: על-העין בדרך שור.

“And the angel of YHWH found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur” (Gen 16:7).

It seems that the escaping Egyptian Hagar was then on her way back to Egypt. Later, when Hagar’s son grew up, we are told: **“And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt”** (Gen 21:23).

Yet four chapters later we are told about the offspring of “Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bore to Abraham”:

וישכנו מחוילה עד-שור אשר על-פני מצרים, באכה אשורה

“And they dwelt from Havilah to Shur that is before Egypt, as you come to Asshur” (Gen 25:18).

However, the logic of this verse, and the reading of: **בואך שורה** - “as you come to Shur” (1 Sam 27:8), suggest that here **באכה אשורה** is a letter-insertion error of **באכה שורה** - “as you come to Shur.” This error suggests that similar errors might also have occurred in some of the multiple biblical verses that mention **מצרים** and **אשור** which are conventionally assumed to be “Egypt” and “Assyria.”

These examples suggest that the biblical name **שור** - “Shur” may be a variant of the Egyptian term “Deshert.”

It should also be noted that in the Book of Jeremiah we find: **ומשוח בששר** which was translated to Greek (and to English) as: “and painted with vermilion.” (Jer 22:14; see also: Eze 23:14). The similarity in sound of the Hebrew **ששר** (*sheshar*) and the Egyptian “Deshert” suggests that if the Greek translator did not err here, the Prophet Jeremiah must have known the meaning of this Egyptian term.

Egypt's agriculture was dependent on the size of the annual flood that would deposit fertile silt on the banks of the river Nile. This silt had a black color, and the Egyptians referred to their arable land as the “**black land**” or “**Kemet**” in ancient Egyptian.



Here again we may wonder whether there is in the Hebrew Bible evidence that the Israelites were aware of this Egyptian term and whether they knew its meaning, which would be in Hebrew: “**ארץ שחורה**.”

There are several biblical verses that refer to a black color as: **שחור** (*shakhor*) (e.g. Lev 13:31, 37; Zec 6:2, 6; Job 30:30; Cant 1:5, 6; 5:11; Thr 4:8).

As there are biblical remarks that the Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah had been in Egypt, it is not unlikely that they were aware of this Egyptian term and knew its meaning.

In the Book of Jeremiah we read:

**ועתה, מה-לך לדרך מצרים, לשתות מי שחור;**

“**And now what have you to do in the way to Egypt, to drink the waters of Shihor?**” (Jer 2:18).

The Prophet Isaiah said: **ובמים רבים זרע שחר, קציר יאור** - “**And in much waters the seed of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile**” (Is 23:3).

Although we have not found evidence that Egypt is referred to in the Hebrew Bible as “**Kemet**”, its description as שִׁחֹר - “**Shihor**” suggests that at least Isaiah and Jeremiah were aware that the meaning of this Egyptian term is “**black.**” Furthermore, As indicated by the Prophet Isaiah, he knew that this was the arable land of the Egyptians.

Egypt’s current name was derived from the Greek name: Egyptos. In the Amarna letters that were written in cuneiform script in the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Assyrian kings refer to Egypt as *Mitsru* and a similar name appears in the Ugaritic inscriptions. It appears rather odd that in the Hebrew Bible, the people that we are told were enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years (or just four generations) would name that land (more than 580 times): מִצְרַיִם (*mitsraim*), a name used by foreigners, but not by the ancient Egyptians themselves.