

## **Sinuhe, the Bible and the Patriarchs**

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The name Sinuhe is known to most readers from the famous novel of the Finnish writer Mika Waltari, entitled *Sinuhe the Egyptian*, which was first published in 1945. This fictitious account of a physician from the time of Akhenaten has an ancient precursor of the same name, who lived at the beginning of the nineteenth century BC, i.e. more than half a millennium earlier. This ancient Sinuhe was, just as his more famous counterpart from the novel, also fictitious, but his destiny, narrated in the context of the events that took place almost four thousand years ago, is no less thrilling.

Sinuhe's fictitious account – we still possess no evidence that he was an actual individual - is dated to the beginning of the second millennium BC. Its author is unknown, which is typical for ancient Egyptian literature, in which authorship was not considered an important issue. Sinuhe's story may be summarised as follows: the first king of the Middle Kingdom, Amenemhat I, is assassinated while his son Senwosret I is off leading a military campaign against the Bedouin in the Western Desert. After the king's death, messengers are despatched to his son in order to inform him about the circumstances of his father's demise. Senwosret leaves the army, which is on its way back to Egypt, without hesitation and speeds to Egypt to suppress the potential revolt in the capital. The high courtier Sinuhe overhears the message of the royal envoys and, out of fear of being considered among those responsible for the assassination, sets flight. He eventually leaves Egypt and joins the south Levantine Bedouin to the northeast of the Egyptian frontier. The Bedouin chieftain develops an affection for Sinuhe, marries his daughter to him, gives him part of his tribe, and assigns territory to him. Sinuhe spends most of his life here, surrounded by his new family. However, he is also compelled to defend his position at the head of his tribe. Thus, one day a giant arrives, the hero of the land of Retjenu, to challenge Sinuhe to battle in order to take possession of his property. The following day Sinuhe fights an almost hopeless duel, in the end, however, he manages to win. This story was, according to some scholars, the inspiration of the account of the duel of David and Goliath, dating to almost a millennium later. In the end Sinuhe, encouraged by the king, returns to Egypt in his old age, where he is welcomed as a close friend of the

king, who takes care of him and has a tomb built for him in the necropolis. Thus Sinuhe's existence in the afterlife is guaranteed.

Sinuhe's account is narrated in the context of the early Middle Bronze Age Period in the area of Syria-Palestine, i.e. in the time considered contemporaneous with the Old Testament Patriarchs headed by Abraham. Sinuhe's lifestyle outside Egypt corresponds to that of the Biblical Patriarchs at the time of their arrival in Syria-Palestine. This is one of the reasons why Sinuhe is sometimes connected with the migration of Abraham and his tribe, although even now it is impossible to determine precisely the time of Abraham's appearance on the scene (it is most often dated to the twentieth - seventeenth century BC).

Despite the fact that the story is fictitious, many descriptions and events included in it correspond to the conditions and environment that we know from the contemporary archaeological and written evidence from Syria-Palestine. Sinuhe's story takes place in the context of the political, economic and human events of ancient Egypt and Syria-Palestine during the twentieth and nineteenth centuries BC. The present work therefore includes, in addition to the translation of the text and commentary in the first chapter, two chapters explaining the political history of Egypt and Syria-Palestine, which may help us to elucidate the background of Sinuhe's flight. The final part focuses on the religious concepts of the ancient Egyptians connected with life after death. The individual chapters incorporate the most recent developments in archaeological exploration, both in Egypt and in the area of Syria-Palestine. The same emphasis is put on contemporary epigraphic sources and their interpretation in the light of various scholarly disciplines covering the individual problems (such as Egyptology, cuneiform studies, archaeology of the Ancient Near East, anthropology of nomadic populations, etc.). The citations of original epigraphic sources should assist the reader in creating his or her own independent concept of the problem. The individual chapters also include selected bibliographies with the main relevant secondary sources.

Sinuhe's story was conceived by its author(s) above all as a political composition, on the basis of which Amenemhat's son and successor was to be cleared of all charges concerning his possible participation in the assassination of his father or its organisation. This is also attested by the passages celebrating king Senwosret I (once in a hymn, the

second time in a letter of Sinuhe to the king). At the same time, however, Sinuhe's account is also a description of the life of a loyal Egyptian official, who, despite his flight from Egypt (as a consequence of the 'intention of God,' as he himself makes it clear), remains true to the principles characterising the Egyptian official, i.e. loyalty to the Egyptian king, religiosity—Sinuhe never conceived of worshipping foreign gods despite his lengthy stay abroad—and the desire to be buried in the Egyptian homeland in the vicinity of his lord. To an extent, Sinuhe's text gives an impression of an ethical treatise. It is thus even now extremely difficult to determine its genre; it is a fairy tale and at the same time a political manifesto with typical biographical elements.

Sinuhe's account, one of the most interesting works of ancient Egyptian literature, remains one of the most discussed literary sources from the Middle Kingdom. By this term, Egyptologists mean the period between the years 1938 - 1759 BC, the reigns of the rulers of the Twelfth Egyptian Dynasty. After a period of internal disorder following the end of the Old Kingdom, these kings revived the traditions from the age of the famous pyramid builders. Sinuhe's account was preserved on several Middle Kingdom papyri, most of which come from the time of Amenemhat III. From this era two partially damaged papyri with the composition are preserved, namely Papyrus Berlin 3022 (abbreviated in Egyptological literature as B), which has a damaged beginning and contains altogether 311 lines, and Papyrus Berlin 10499 (abbreviated as R), which contains 203 lines and a preserved beginning. The translation in the present study is based on the hieroglyphic transcriptions of these two papyri. They were acquired in Egypt in the middle of the nineteenth century by the founder of German Egyptology K. R. Lepsius during a three-year expedition to Egypt undertaken in 1842 - 1845. Fragments of this text are preserved on another four papyri. The popularity of Sinuhe's account is attested by the fact that it continued to be copied for several subsequent centuries. In this context it is interesting to mention the 2002 publication of the inscriptions from Wadi el-Hol in the Western Desert near Thebes by American Egyptologists John and Deborah Darnell. One of the inscriptions (number 4), composed by Dedusobek and dated to the reign of Amenemhat III enumerates the same gods as does Sinuhe in his letter addressed to his Lord, King Senwosret I. It seems feasible to suppose that these were the gods considered most worth mentioning by any Egyptian leaving the country. From the time of

the New Kingdom (1539-1292 BC), esp. from the Ramesside Period (Nineteenth Dynasty) come almost thirty ostraca (inscribed limestone chips or pottery sherds) with parts of Sinuhe's tale, originating from the scribal school of Deir el-Medineh. The most famous copy of this text is inscribed on an ostrakon now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford; a similar but slightly smaller ostrakon is preserved in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (No. 27419).