

THE TEN PLAGUES: DEBUNKING EGYPTIAN POLYTHEISM

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Miraculous occurrences are frequent in biblical writings. They demonstrate the omnipotence of God, who guides the history of the world to His desires. When reading about such God chose to carry out His wishes in the particular manner in which they supernatural events, it is essential for the reader to confront the question as to why were reported. His omnipotence allowed Him many different ways to accomplish His desires; we must examine what the reported methods tell us.

The choice of the plagues which were visited upon the Egyptians is a good example of this rule. Exodus 12:12 states that the plagues served as *punishments for all the gods of Egypt*. I propose that these events are a confrontation of Egyptian polytheism with the Israelite monotheism of their forefathers. This idea was introduced by Ziony Zevit in the *Bible Review*¹ and can be strengthened by two dogmas of the Egyptian religion which are not included there, namely, their belief that slaves had no personal relationship with the gods,² and that their king was the son of their chief god Ra.³

Polytheism, the belief in several gods, includes by its very nature a relationship of these deities to each other. It may be a friendly family connection or a hostile attitude, where one god may kill another for whatever gain is sought. A god whose adherents are defeated in battle is automatically reduced to impotence or non-existence. Each god has specified territorial power or is in charge of specific tasks and if his or her domination would run counter to that of another god, the stronger one will enforce his will. Based on this view, the god of the Hebrews, who may have existed once, must have lost his power or his life when his people were enslaved.

The Egyptian belief that slaves had no personal relationship with the gods is clearly manifested by the paintings discovered in ancient tombs and pyramids. When picturing the afterlife of their kings, they are being served by the same slaves who had to serve them during their life. The prevailing idea of our time, that after death the poor and downtrodden will be equal to their

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masters, was not the theology of that time. Slaves in the Egyptian theology remained servants and the departed king ruled over them as he had during his life. The slaves never had a personal god, not in this world and not in the afterlife.

This ancient theology is hinted at within the text of the Bible and elucidates some portions of it. The signs given to Moses to perform for the Israelites were meant to show them that, contrary to Egyptian belief, the enslaved Israelites had a God who looked after them, a God who could and would free them. The lifeless staff becomes a live serpent, the hand that was stricken with leprosy returns to healthy flesh, just as the God of Abraham who had chosen to be inactive for a while could and would become active again. He would challenge and defeat the polytheistic deities on whom the Egyptians relied.

Who were these Egyptian gods, soon to be defeated? One was the Nile River, which was the source of the people's existence. Its yearly overflows irrigated their fields and thereby provided their sustenance. Not surprisingly, godlike qualities were ascribed to it.⁴

Egyptians also prayed to animals which were held to be their protectors. A large assortment of animals received veneration, each town or village having a different animal as its protector. When Egypt became unified, the traditions maintained themselves and so a variety of animals became the country's gods.⁵

Above them ruled the sun-god Ra, the most powerful of all the deities. This supreme creator and ruler of the world was also regarded as the father of Egypt's earthly kings. According to this belief, the firstborn of the royal family, and therefore the future king, was sired by Ra, the human father being no more than an intermediary.

Keeping in mind these Egyptian dogmas enhances the biblical report of the Exodus and improves our understanding of the religious controversies between ancient Egyptian polytheism and the Hebrew monotheism reborn at this time.⁶

The biblical account of the Exodus starts with the demand by Moses that the Hebrew slaves be granted a temporary respite enabling them to celebrate with their God (Ex. 5:1). The request did not include a demand for total emancipation. Was Moses using a diplomatic untruth when presenting this

request? Not at all: such a temporary release would have demonstrated that these slaves had a god, which would – according to the belief of the time – terminate their status as godless slaves.⁷ The initial demand, therefore, was a forerunner of complete freedom, allowing the slaves of yesterday to emigrate if they so wished. No wonder Pharaoh replied *'Who is this God?'* (5:2). Slaves, after all, have no heavenly protectors.

Belief in the divine nature of Egyptian royalty may explain why the king did not order the execution of Moses after he submitted his "outrageous" demand to free the Hebrews. Any potentate, like Pharaoh, would in the normal course of events have no mercy on such an agitator. It was perhaps Pharaoh's belief that Moses, who had been raised in the royal palace as the adopted son of the princess, shared some of the king's own godlike qualities. Pharaoh may have feared that it would be a violation of Ra's wishes to have Moses eliminated. Never mind if Moses was not a natural son of the princess – Ra had many ways of bestowing a godlike child on Pharaoh's daughter. After all, when the previous ruler sought to kill Moses before he fled to Midian, the attempt had failed.

The God of the Hebrews, in whose name Moses acted, later visited ten plagues upon the Egyptians which ultimately led to the release of the slaves. Four of these plagues were events in which the animals, supposedly guardians of the Egyptian population, turned into extremely troublesome or dangerous attackers (frogs, lice, wild beasts and locusts). Three of them subjected the "godlike" animals to bouts of sickness (pestilence, boils) or devastation (hail) which, in the latter case, required human protection. This explains the reports specifying that both men and animals were attacked (see Ex. 9:9, 9:25). Two of the plagues reduced Egyptian gods to a state of powerlessness in which they could not bestow their normal divine favors (Nile water turned into blood; darkness extinguishing Ra's light). The last plague threatened and slew Egypt's firstborn, man and beast. This would include Pharaoh himself, because it was usually the firstborn who inherited the throne and who, as noted above, was thought to be the child of Egypt's foremost deity.

The ten plagues were therefore not merely a succession of events that made life unbearable for the Egyptian population; they were also a demonstration of the Hebrew God's power and supremacy over the local deities.⁸ The god of

the slaves, who was not even supposed to exist, was able to reduce the "existing" gods to powerless entities.

The tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, was a personal threat to the king himself. No wonder he took steps to quickly expel the former slaves from his country. It became a matter of self-preservation, following the plague of darkness which showed that even the sun-god Ra, father of Pharaoh, was unable to defend his position in a battle with the God of the Hebrews.

A few days later, when Pharaoh was still alive, new thoughts occurred to him. He no longer feared for his life. His godlike powers had apparently saved him and Ra was once more Egypt's supreme ruler. With his self-confidence restored, Pharaoh decided to pursue the runaway Hebrew slaves. Their god, he believed, could finally be overcome. The subsequent destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea must have come as a severe shock to those who put faith in Egyptian theology.

NOTES

1. Ziony Zevit, "Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues", *Bible Review*, 6:03 (June 1990).
2. Adolf Erman, Hermann Ranke, *Ägypten und ägyptisches Leben im Altertum* (Tübingen: J.C. Muhr, 1923) p. 144. Indeed, according to Ranke, "the serf was, like the cattle, the property of the king or the temple. He was looked upon with contempt as a person who has no 'heart', namely a mind. He has to be driven like cattle with beatings to his work."
3. See Epiphanius Wilson, *Egyptian Literature* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1901) p. 320.
4. See Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) p. 39.
5. Charles Anthon, *A Classical Dictionary: Containing the Principal Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors* (New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1888), Part 1, pp.37-8.
6. The Hebrews themselves reverted to idol worship while slaves in Egypt: see Ezekiel 20:7-8.
7. See Amos Hakham, *Sefer Shemot – Da'at Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1991), vol. 1, p. 53 (Hebrew).
8. For the correlation between plagues and the specific Egyptian deities they negated, see Howard F. Vos, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Customs and Manners* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999) pp.55-7.