Exodus at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Parashat Va'era, Exodus, Chapters 7-10 | December 30, 2021

In the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, visitors are greeted by an enormous statue of a pharaoh, which measures over 10 feet tall, looming over the grandiose vestibule, dominating the vision of those who enter. It is an awe-inspiring sight. But which pharaoh is it? Interestingly, it is several. It was originally created in around 900 BCE to depict the visage and the glory of King Amenemhat II. Then, 600 years later, another pharaoh stepped in and decided that the statue would be more attractive if it looked like him. This man was Ramesses II, identified by many as the Pharaoh of the Exodus, first and foremost because one of the storage cities built by the slaves is named after him. (Few focus on the most impressive evidence, which is of course the actual video footage of the Exodus from the film *The Ten Commandments*.) It is Ramesses who we meet immediately upon entering the Met, and whether or not we are looking at "our" pharaoh, the statue bears an inscription, a pagan proclamation that tells us a great deal about the ultimate religious message of the Exodus itself.

The final plague brought upon Egypt is predicted in the Bible from the very beginning:

> *And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, thus saith the Lord: Israel is my son, my firstborn:*
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> *And I say unto thee, Let my son go that he may serve me; and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn.* (Exodus 4:22-23)

Yet an explanation is never offered for why this plague is preceded by so many others. For further understanding, we turn to the inscription on the statue in the Great Hall. I cite the Met Museum website, which tells us as follows:

> In the center, two long text columns proclaim the same three of the five official names of Ramesses II. Two versions of his so-called Horus name, designating him as the incarnation of the sky and kingship god Horus, translate: "Mighty bull beloved of Maat (goddess of right order and justice)" on the right and "Mighty bull beloved of Re (the sun god)" on the left. Below the Horus name in both columns Ramesses II's throne name, bestowed during the coronation, designates him as king of Upper and Lower Egypt: "Powerful is the Maat of Re, chosen of Re."

Re, or Ra, is of course the sun god. But who is Ma'at and what does it mean to say that the pharaoh is "Beloved of Ma'at"? This is a word many of us don't know, but it is absolutely essential to understanding the Exodus story, because it is Ma'at that lies at the heart of Moses' challenge to Pharaoh. One educators' source from the Met Museum explains that:

> The goddess Ma'at personified the equilibrium in the world; she was, therefore, especially associated with the king. On the strength of his divine nature the king was the mediator between the gods and humankind.

Ma'at, in other words, is the theological foundation of Egyptian tyranny.

This point is elaborated upon in an excellent explanation in the Hertog *Tanakh of the Land of Israel* edition of Exodus, where we are told that:

> Ma'at was a powerful social and political instrument through which the ancient Egyptian king governed. As an all-encompassing, deified concept, Ma'at secured the king's position as

> the one and only sovereign of Egypt, and Ma'at enabled the upper classes to maintain their social status, and in some respect forced the various parties of Egyptian society to obey and accept their respective places within the society.

The volume further explains that this concept of the maintenance of order is linked to the agricultural nature of Egyptian society. The king, as the one responsible for maintaining Ma'at, needed to ensure the land's fertility and agricultural success. Moses therefore undermines this claimed status in the assault on agriculture that the plagues provide.

So Ramesses, as his statue declared, is the embodiment of Ma'at on Earth, the intermediary of the gods who ensures the balance of all aspects of nature, and he is also known as the son of Re, the sun god. These are honors claimed by the Pharaoh of Egypt. If Moses is going to challenge the theology at the heart of this tyranny, it is these identities that have to be utterly dismantled, bit by bit, until they are utterly disproven. The political aspects of the Exodus are bound up with the theology that the God of Israel seeks to establish, so that all the plagues that follow will embody not merely a punishment of the Egyptians, but also a comprehensive undoing of their entire religious worldview. Let us see how this is so, beginning with chapter 5:

> *And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.*
>
> *And Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, and neither will I let Israel go.*
>
> *And they said, The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the Lord our God . . .* (Exodus 5:1-3)

The first sentence is famous, "*Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go. . . .*" But the rest of the conversation with Pharaoh is unfortunately ignored. Moses speaks initially of the God of Israel, but then, when Pharaoh ignores Moses, he changes his description of this Divinity in whose name he speaks, and Moses says, "*The God of the Hebrews hath met with us. . . .*" Why after the reference by Moses to the God of Israel seems to make no impact on the Egyptian king, does Moses suddenly switch to referring to the God of the Hebrews?

There is today a great deal of misunderstanding about the term "Hebrew." An assumption exists that it is an ethnic, or nationalistic term. In fact, the word Hebrew or *Ivr,* is not ethnic, but has profound religious implications, rather than national ones. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun notes that in the Ancient Near East, most people believed in territorial divinities: local gods who exercised tyrannical rule over a country's inhabitants but were powerless beyond their borders. But Abraham was called *Ivri*, Hebrew, linked to the infinitive "*la'avor*," "to cross over," for he crossed from Mesopotamia to Canaan, believing that the God he met in Mesopotamia would be with him in an entirely different land when he crossed over and came there. Thus, to speak of the God of the Hebrews is to reference a God whose power is everywhere. Thus, Rabbi Bin-Nun explains, when Moses informs the Egyptian Pharaoh that the "God of Israel" has demanded the release of His people, and Pharaoh parries by claiming that the deity of a non-Egyptian land is of no relevance to him, Moses proceeds to instruct him otherwise. "*The God of the Hebrews*" has sent us, he declares—that is, a God whose writ is not contained by borders.

We are thus beginning to see how Egyptian tyranny is profoundly bound up with its theology, and others have understood this, and seen in the tyrannies of modern times the "Egypt" of their own age. When *The Ten Commandments* was first shown in theaters, at the height of the Cold War, Cecil B. DeMille himself appeared on screen before the film began and addressed the audience:

> Ladies and gentlemen, young and old, this may seem an unusual procedure, speaking to you before the picture begins. But we have an unusual subject, the story of the birth of freedom. . . . The theme of this picture is whether

men ought to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Ramesses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? The same battle continues throughout the world today.

Moses in this story seeks to illustrate that we are free souls under God, not the property of Pharaoh, and to do this, it is Egyptian paganism that must be assaulted. As the plagues proceed, Moses highlights how the God of Israel is truly a God of the Hebrews; He is not constrained and is omnipotent in Egypt as well.

Moses is sent to Pharaoh to deliver the decree that all Egypt's water would turn into blood. Aaron throws down his staff, the staff transforms, and Aaron's staff ultimately devours those of the Egyptian enchanters in Pharaoh's court. But what creature does it turn into? Here is the English, with one critical word left in the original Hebrew:

> *And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so as the Lord had commanded; and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a* tanin*.*
>
> *Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did in like manner with their secret arts.*
>
> *For they cast down every man his rod and they became* taninim*, but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.* (Exodus 7:10-12)

Tanin, and the plural *taninim*, are often rendered, "serpent," and "serpents." And the scene from *The Ten Commandments* supports that translation, for that is what happens in the film. But alas: as much as it pains me to write it, I believe Cecille B. DeMille is incorrect.

When, in chapter 4, Moses asks for a sign to show to Israel, there God allows his staff to transform into a *nachash*, which means "snake." But as Rabbi Natan Slifkin has noted, the word *tanin*, in contrast, is not a snake; it is a crocodile. Aaron's rod transforms into a crocodile and swallows the others. The reference here, obvious to all in Pharaoh's court, is to Sobek, the Egyptian god of the Nile who takes on the form of a crocodile. Aaron is signaling that the Nile, the source of Egyptian prosperity, is about to be undone. The waters will turn to blood.

Thus begins the steady, unremitting attack on the Ma'at of Egypt, where every aspect of the natural order, and the animal gods that embody them, turn on their master, on Pharaoh. This brings us to our next plague, which is *tzefardea*, frogs. Here too, as noted by both Rabbi Sacks and the Hertog Koren Tanakh, what is being described is no mere affliction. The frogs are, at every seder, the children's all-time favorite plague, but the larger point often escapes them: Heqet is the frog goddess of fertility, and this is a clear ironic reference to the Egyptians being punished for throwing the Israelite babies into the Nile.

Thus plague after plague—each one symbolically linked with purported divinity or agricultural prosperity in Egypt—steadily strips away the theological claims of the tyrant Pharaoh himself, leading up to the penultimate plague: darkness. As the Koren volume informs us, the Egyptians believed that the head of the Egyptian divine hierarchy, the sun god, would every evening sail underneath the earth, and then rise. The psychological terror were that not to occur would be immense, and the assault on Pharaoh's stature theologically would be a death blow.

Recall the ascriptions to Ramesses on his statue in the Met's Great Hall. If, as we saw before, two of the titles of Ramses II were the embodiment of cosmic order and the son of the sun god, can there be any greater undoing of these two titles than three days of complete darkness? If Pharaoh is beloved of Ma'at, how can order in nature have been replaced by chaos? If he is the son of the sun god, how come the sun does not rise? If he is the intermediary between humanity and divinity, why are the gods turning on humanity? Why is all this happening, unless Pharaoh is not all he claims to be? There is a tendency to view the plagues as punishments, but they are also, indeed perhaps first and foremost, intended to embody an attack on Egyptian theology—because Egyptian politics and faith are bound up with one another. It is therefore no coincidence, that in our Haggadah on Seder night, we too join the political and

the theological. We are obligated to intone, on the one hand, that "We were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Almighty redeemed us." But we also add, in a separate stanza, that we too are descendants of Abraham's idolatrous ancestors, but God, the Holy One Blessed be He, has brought us near to him and to monotheistic belief. Egyptian tyranny was intertwined with Egyptian idolatry, and Israelite freedom is fostered by Israelite faith. The plagues remind us that the political and the theological go hand in hand; and as Cecil B. DeMille reminds us in his introduction to *The Ten Commandments* that the religious and political question of whether we are free souls under God, or subject to the will and whim of tyrants, is a question that did not end with Egypt, but is rather one that retains great relevance today.

Several years ago, the synagogue on the Upper East Side where I then worked suffered a fire, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art offered us the use of its auditorium for our High Holiday services. When I arrived at the Met on the morning of Rosh Hashanah, I was understandably anxious about how it would feel to mark a sacred service in a museum. I entered, and encountered this enormous statue of the pharaoh, and all I could think of was Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*, a description of another image of Ramesses II.

> And on the pedestal, these words appear:
> My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
> Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
> Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
> The lone and level sands stretch far away.

As I passed through the Egyptology wing to the auditorium, I passed symbol after symbol of an empire that once bestrode the world like a colossus, whose power disintegrated; meanwhile the People of Israel, a tiny nation that once stood against Egypt, lives still. I then read the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, which is all about God as Creator of the world, and providential Director of history. It was one of the most meaningful holidays of my life. Since then, I have visited the Met many times, and as I pass the Ozymandian image dominating the hall, I feel gratitude for my memory of that moment, which will, for me, serve as a source of faith for many years to come.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik argues that the key purpose of the plagues was to demonstrate the theological error of the Egyptian political and religious systems. Why would God seek not simply to liberate his people, but to prove the falsehood of the Egyptian worldview? What does this teach us about the universal vs. particularistic ambitions of Israelite monotheism?

2. Rabbi Soloveichik begins to discuss the political implications of the idea that one God governs the entire world, unconstrained by borders. What are some other political implications of this revolutionary idea?