



PHARAOH'S QUESTION

# Who is Yahweh?





BY R. KELVIN MOORE

THE EXODUS OF THE HEBREWS from Egypt and subsequent return to the promised land constitute one of the most remarkable liberations in world history. All three sections of the Hebrew Bible, Law, Prophets, and Writings, refer to the exodus as God’s wondrous work. The exodus makes up an integral part of biblical faith in both Testaments.<sup>1</sup>

Seemingly innocent, the exodus drama begins to unfold with: “A new king, who had not known Joseph, came to power in Egypt” (Ex. 1:8).<sup>2</sup> Years previous and in prelude to a famine, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams and averted a crisis (see Gen. 41). Now, a “new king” had no understanding or appreciation for Joseph’s contribution. The geographical location of the Hebrews caused additional concern for Pharaoh. The Hebrews lived east of Egypt in Goshen. Most of the Egyptians’ enemies came from the east. Pharaoh knew the Hebrews might unite with any enemy that came from the east. Pharaoh also knew this type union could mean a formidable force on his eastern border. Prudence might have dictated that Pharaoh befriend the Hebrews. Inexplicably and mercilessly, Pharaoh enslaved them! Unwilling to relinquish his Hebrew slave labor, the Bible records: “They worked the Israelites ruthlessly and made their lives bitter with difficult labor in brick and mortar, and in all kinds of fieldwork. They ruthlessly imposed all this work on them” (Ex. 1:13-14).

Exodus 3 records God’s “call” to Moses: “Therefore, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh so that you may lead My people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (v. 10). Reluctantly (see 3:11,13; 4:1,10,13), Moses agreed to the arduous task. Moses delivered God’s message boldly to Pharaoh with a candid demand: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let My people go’” (5:1). “Let” translates an imperative, in an intensive manner, in the original Hebrew. Moses clearly communicated God’s command, not request, to Pharaoh. Pharaoh responded to Moses’ demand with an understandable question and unmistakable refusal, literally translated as: “Who [is] Yahweh that I might obey



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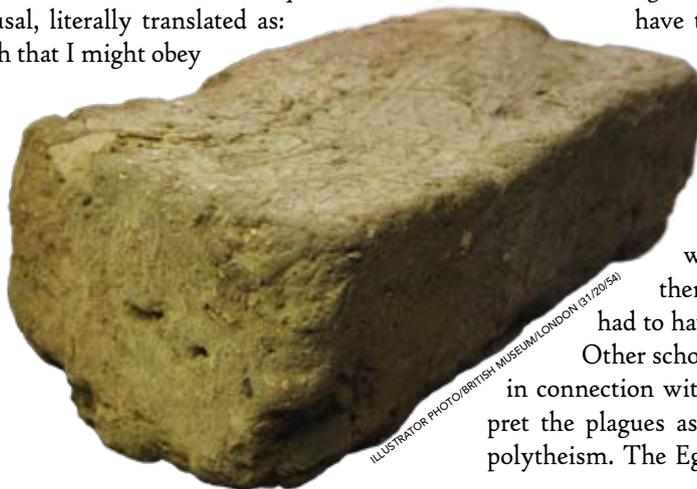
in his voice to send out Israel. I do not know Yahweh and also Israel not I will send out” (v. 2, writer’s translation). Interestingly, the Hebrew verb here translated “I will send out” translates the same intensive manner as the imperative translated as “Let.” Pharaoh matched Moses’ intensity with his own intensity, literally saying: “Not I will send out.”

Readers can imagine Pharaoh—with a snarl on his face and skepticism in his voice—asking: “Who [is] Yahweh?” Pharaoh’s question intrigues us. On the surface such a question seems inconceivable. How could Pharaoh not know something of Yahweh, the mighty Deity of the Hebrews? The answer probably lies in the same realm that Pharaoh “did not know Joseph.” To think that Pharaoh, a man with the best of Egyptian education available to him, did not know his own history and Joseph’s part in that history, seems outlandish. Further, Pharaoh probably had heard of the God of Joseph and his forefathers. If so, he evidently chose to ignore what he knew. Such an action proved to be exorbitantly costly not only for Pharaoh but also for his people.

Might the 10 plagues<sup>3</sup> be interpreted as the answer to Pharaoh’s question, “Who [is] Yahweh?” Scholars have offered various interpretations of the plagues.<sup>4</sup> Some have explained the first nine plagues as natural scourges known to have been bothersome in ancient Egypt. Annually the Nile River began to peak in August and often became red because of the presence of minute organisms. Egyptian historical accounts record numerous plagues of frogs. Dead frogs would then attract gnats (the third plague), and so forth. Some have tried to remove from this interpretation any element of divine activity. But, rationalizing the plagues as mere natural occurrences is impossible. Moses’ prior faith elevates the events from mere chance occurrences. The intensity, the timing, and the fact that the Hebrews were spared from the plagues remove them from the realm of the accidental. They had to have been the work of God.

Other scholars have long interpreted the ten plagues in connection with Egyptian deities. Some scholars interpret the plagues as striking at the very heart of Egyptian polytheism. The Egyptians, in essence, worshiped the Nile.

Right: Mud brick made with straw and stamped with the cartouche of Ramesses II, who ruled in the 19th Dynasty. The brick was from the Ramesseum in Thebes. Mud bricks were used for the walls and storerooms surrounding Egyptian temples.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRITISH MUSEUM/LONDON (31/20/54)

**Agricultural scene from Wadi Tumilat in Egypt. Some biblical scholars have believed this to be the region of Goshen. The children of Israel would have passed through this area on their way to Succoth.**

**Left: Interior of tomb of Khnemhotep II at Beni Hasan shows a caravan of Asiatics arriving in Egypt with items to trade, including gazelles. The clothing and facial hair indicate this group may have been Hebrew. The image dates to about 1900 B.C.**





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (16/28/16)

**Left: Domestic ruins and tombs of workmen at Deir Al Medina, which is across the Nile from Luxor. This village provides one of the best-preserved glimpses into the working class lives of ancient Egypt. The site, first excavated in the early 1900s, has about 70 houses, averaging about 750 square**

**feet in size. Cells and rooftop rooms provided additional living space. The village housed common laborers that mostly worked on the monuments and temples at Luxor.**

**Lower left: Ring with scarab shaped bezel, gold and red jasper. Inscription is for Pharaoh Thutmose III.**



Its annual flooding irrigated adjacent croplands and made life sustainable in a wasteland of rocks and sand. The Hebrews' God, however, showed His power over the Nile by turning it into blood. Early historical records indicate that Egyptians living in Memphis worshiped the sacred bull, Apis. Destroying the livestock (fifth plague) showed God's power to defeat Apis. The Egyptians worshiped Re, the sun god. Re wore a disk, symbolizing the sun, as his crown. But the God of the Hebrews made a "darkness over the land of Egypt, even a darkness which may be felt" (10:21). Obviously Re did not control the sun after all. The Egyptians viewed Pharaoh as a god. But, the tenth plague records Pharaoh's impotency even to protect his own son's life. Within this interpretation, when the "plagues" concluded, Egyptian polytheism collapsed.

In addition to the death knell for Egyptian beliefs, might the plagues have served another purpose? The answer is, yes. Loudly and clearly, the plagues answered Pharaoh's question: "Who [is] Yahweh?" While numerous conclusions might be drawn as to specifically how the plagues answered Pharaoh's question, at least two appear obvious: the plagues communicated Yahweh's sovereignty and Yahweh's power.

The plagues communicated Yahweh's sovereignty. Many in the Old Testament world believed in land-locked deities. Second Kings 5 illustrates that Naaman held to such a belief. Naaman, a Syrian, traveled to the promised land (specifically, Samaria) and Elisha (Yahweh!) healed him of leprosy. Naaman's request appears odd: "please let two mule-loads of dirt be given to your servant" (v. 17). Naaman desired to worship the God who cured his leprosy and believed that physical soil was necessary because gods were land-locked. Perhaps Pharaoh knew about Yahweh but believed that this Yahweh reigned in the land of the Hebrews and not in the land of Egypt. The plagues changed Pharaoh's belief, illustrating Yahweh reigned in Egypt as well as the promised land.

The plagues communicated Yahweh's power. From the earliest accounts, biblical authors present Egypt as one of

the most powerful nations in the world.<sup>5</sup> Dating the exodus to about 1450 B.C. (1 Kings 6:1) places it in the time period of what historians refer to as the

"New Kingdom" of Egyptian domination (1539–1075 B.C.).<sup>6</sup> By the time of Pharaoh Thutmose III (1479–1425 B.C.), Egypt essentially had become an empire. Geography insulated Egypt from invasions from outsiders. Surrounding deserts proved daunting for most approaching enemies. Only during times of Egyptian weakness or division were enemies able to penetrate successfully. Within this environment one can see Pharaoh arrogantly dismissing the demands of Moses' Yahweh. After all, who could challenge Egyptian supremacy? The plagues changed Pharaoh's belief regarding the power of the Hebrew Deity, Yahweh. When the plagues concluded, Pharaoh had the answer to his question, "Who [is] Yahweh?"

The exodus, with the plagues, represent more than the central event of the Old Testament. They remind subsequent generations of God's sovereignty and power. **B**

1. Undoubtedly Matthew's "He [Joseph, Mary's husband] stayed there until Herod's death, so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled: 'Out of Egypt I called My Son'" (2:15) brought a previous deliverance (the exodus) to the mind of Matthew's original hearers (Jewish Christians). See also Paul's sermon at Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:16ff.), especially, "The God of this people Israel chose our forefathers, exalted the people during their stay in the land of Egypt, and led them out of it with a mighty arm" and Hebrews 11:29: "By faith they crossed the Red Sea as though they were on dry land. When the Egyptians attempted to do this, they were drowned."

2. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

3. The word "plague" occurs eight times in the Book of Exodus in the HCSB. These events may be better understood as signs and wonders of the power of God.

4. Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., "Exodus" in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Clifton J. Allen, vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 349.

5. For additional information regarding Egypt check the article "Egypt" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, gen. ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 228–29.

6. Herbert B. Huffmon, "Egypt" in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 272.

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