

ANCIENT EGYPT'S SILENCE ABOUT THE EXODUS

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Although the Bible portrays it as a cataclysmic event that heavily devastated the nation (Exod 10:7), we have no evidence that ancient Egypt ever made any historical references to the Exodus of the Hebrews.¹ But that should not be surprising because of certain aspects of Egyptian culture. One involves the purpose of monumental inscriptions and another the way Egyptians viewed the very nature of writing itself.

Because the Egyptians left such extensive written records, some allusion to the incident would be expected. Yet none appears. Scholars have taken a number of positions regarding this fact. A minority have concluded that the lack of written and other archaeological evidence indicates that the Exodus never occurred. Other biblical scholars, however, conclude that the biblical writers would not have made up Israel's origins in slavery, so the Exodus must have some historical basis. As John Bright states: "It is not the sort of tradition any people would invent!" The lack of historical records could be simply the result of random preservation. Even the dry climate of Egypt would not guarantee that everything would survive. Fires, wars, accidents, and other factors would cause the loss of some documents. Nicolas Grimal suggests that Egypt ignored the Hebrews because they did not consider Israel important.² Other biblical scholars see Egypt's silence as deliberate, stemming from propagandistic motivations. R. Alan Cole observes that "Egyptian monarchs were never given to recording defeats and disasters, and certainly not the loss of a chariot brigade during the pursuit of runaway slaves."³ The ancient Egyptians wanted to put the best face on everything that happened.

One often-cited example is the encounter of Ramesses II with the Hittites at Qadesh on the Orontes River. The Hittite army, waiting in ambush, allowed the first division to get past, then attacked the second

¹John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 121. Nor does any other nonbiblical source mention it; see, e.g., Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 8; John Romer, *Testament: The Bible and History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), 57.

²Nicolas Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, trans. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 258.

³R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 41.

division while the third was still struggling across the ford of Shabtuna. Pharaoh's soldiers began to flee from the onslaught and the Egyptian ruler was almost captured. Ramesses sought help from the Egyptian god Amun, then rallied his troops and hacked his way through the Hittite forces. The next day the Hittite leader Muwatallis sent an envoy asking for a truce.⁴

Apparently considering it the military high point of his reign, Ramesses had the battle recorded on the walls of many of his temples, including Abydos, Karnak, Luxor, the Ramesseum, and Abu Simel. Accounts have also survived on papyrus, making it the best documented military incident in Egyptian history.⁵ But modern scholars see the battle of Qadesh in a quite different light. Instead of a victory, Ramesses did little more than extricate his army.⁶ Only the timely arrival of more of his troops saved him. The battle resumed the next day but ended in a stalemate. Ramesses II refused to make a treaty with the Hittites, and as soon as the Egyptians left the Hittites regained control of the area and pushed the Egyptian area of influence back to Canaan. Eventually, Ramesses II had to make a nonaggression treaty with the new Hittite king, Hattusilis III, so the two nations could counter the growing threat of the Assyrian empire led by Shalmaneser I.⁷ What Ramesses II portrayed as a great triumph was most likely little more than a military draw.

Recognizing the propagandist nature of Egyptian records, Kenneth Kitchen commented that "the lack of any explicit Egyptian mention of an Exodus is of no historical import, given its unfavorable role in Egypt, and the near total loss of all relevant records in any case."⁸ But the Egyptian silence toward the Exodus may have been more complicated than this.

⁴Grimal, 253-256.

⁵Ibid., 253. For the inscription, see ANET, 255, 256.

⁶Ibid., 256; cf. J. H. Breasted, *The Battle of Kadesh, A Study in the Earliest Known Military Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903); H. Goedicke, "Considerations of the Battle of Kadesh," *JEA* 52 (1966), 71-80; Kenneth Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1983), 53-62; H. Goedicke, ed., *Perspectives on the Battle of Kadesh* (Baltimore: Halgo, 1985); B. Ockinga, "On the Interpretation of the Kadesh Record," *Chronique d'Égypte* 62/123-124 (1987), 38-48.

⁷Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 237. Both Egyptian and Hittite copies of the treaty have been found, indicating how Egypt accepted Hittite mastery north of Syria; see Chester G. Starr, *A History of the Ancient World*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 95; William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 281, 282; cf. Cyril Aldred, *The Egyptians*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 150.

⁸David Noel Freedman, ed. *ABD* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 707.

First, though, we would not expect to find such an event as the Exodus recorded on monumental inscriptions. Most of them appeared in temples. The pharaohs used temple inscriptions to remind the particular god of the temple that they had ruled wisely and justly in the deity's behalf. Such records would aid the Egyptian king when he faced judgment in the afterlife by demonstrating that he had lived according to the principles of *Ma'at*. Thus, monumental inscriptions would definitely not be the place to mention an event such as the Exodus. The plagues preceding the departure of the Hebrews would have appeared to indicate anger or constitute punishment on the part of the gods. Furthermore, the plagues could be seen as an attack on Egypt's understanding of creation, order, and harmony (*Ma'at*) in the universe.⁹ The Egyptians would not have wanted any public reminders of the experience.

What about references to the Exodus in less public documents? Their understanding of the purpose and nature of language¹⁰ suggests that they would have avoided referring to it even in nonpublic written materials.

The Egyptian term for writing, *medu netcher*, means "the words of the gods," "divine words." Written words were the human counterpart of the words of the gods themselves, and thus shared their magical powers. To the ancient Egyptians, words were creative in a very real sense. They contained in them the template for bringing into being the things they represented. The creator god Ptah brought the other gods and such things as life, food, and justice into existence through performative speaking. One ancient text described Ptah as "the mouth which pronounced the name of everything."¹¹ His creative words were not only "what the head thought and the tongue commanded,"¹² but the words themselves were magical, containing the essence of what they stood for. For a god to speak endowed the object of the comment with actual existence.¹³ Thoth, scribe of the gods, could declare: "I am Thoth, master of the divine words (the hieroglyphs) which put things in their (proper) place. . . . I am Thoth who puts *Ma'at* [divine order] in writing for the Ennead. Everything that

⁹J. K. Hoffmeier, "Egypt, Plagues in," in *ABD*, 2:374-378. Some scholars see the plagues as a decreation of the world; see Fretheim, 106-129; John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 113-120.

¹⁰Dimitri Meeks and Christine Favard-Meeks, *Daily Life of the Egyptian Gods*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5, 104, 105.

¹¹Cited in Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, trans. Anne E. Keep (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 164.

¹²Cited in *ibid.*

¹³Meeks and Meeks, 104.

comes out of my mouth takes on existence as (if I were) Re."¹⁴

To announce an event was the same as its actually taking place.¹⁵ An insult, curse, or threat had power in itself to become reality. "Thus the spoken word was a weapon that had the power to subjugate or annihilate one's enemies."¹⁶ To name something was to make it actually exist. When a pious visitor to a tomb read aloud the offering formula inscribed there—"a thousand loaves of bread, a thousand jugs of beer"—it brought the items into existence for the deceased.¹⁷

The magic and power inherent in words also inhered in them when they were written down. In the same way as with the spoken word, every hieroglyphic sign contained the template or essence of a being, a thing, or the world the gods might want to bring into existence. A sign would be considered to contain the property of life itself. Rosalie David observes that writing's "most important function was to provide a means by which certain concepts or events could be brought into existence. The Egyptians believed that if something was committed to writing it could be repeatedly "made to happen' by means of magic."¹⁸

But that "magic" had a highly rational basis. Religious texts in tombs and temples, magical texts, and spells all worked on the principle that words triggered *heka*,¹⁹ the primeval potency that empowered the creator-god in the beginning. Moderns tend to think of magic as invoking the aid of supernatural or occult forces. While Egyptians would ask for divine help and intervention, they also regarded magic as activating forces inherent in the structure of the cosmos itself. Written and spoken magic was somewhat analogous to building a machine that operated on natural physical laws. Magic employed the forces that comprised and regulated the universe and controlled even the gods themselves.²⁰ In ancient Egypt, magic was the tool or controlling mechanism to restore all forms of order and harmony, thus ensuring that they continued. And writing was a major

¹⁴Cited in *ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Serge Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, new ed., trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 123, 124.

¹⁸Rosalie David, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199.

¹⁹Sometimes personified as a god, Heka.

²⁰For an overview of Egyptian magic, see Christian Jacq, *Egyptian Magic*, trans. J. M. Davis (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1985); Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993).

aspect of that magic. David suggests that the name of the schools in which Egyptians learned to read and write—the House of Life—“may reflect the power of life that was believed to exist in the divinely inspired writings composed, copied, and often stored there.”²¹

Writing brought the powers of the invisible or spiritual world into the physical and visible. “Whether a ritual or a magical spell, a text constituted words whose effectiveness crossed the boundary between the two realms. This ability was only an extension of the effect of words: when pronounced, they traveled across space and provoked an emotion or a material reaction in their hearers.”²²

The magic of writing was especially used in tombs, temples, and other sacred areas. Writing was particularly important for insuring survival after death. Recording a person’s name on the walls of a tomb or on a statue would preserve their existence if anything happened to the embalmed body itself.²³ The dead needed to be fed, but later generations might forget to bring food offerings. A written menu could substitute in an emergency by becoming real food for the deceased. The written record and the tomb paintings would guarantee its occupant’s continued existence and enjoyment of all of the present life’s pleasures.

Egyptians also sought to use the magical power of words in other ways. Hieroglyphs representing such qualities as longevity, prosperity, or divine protection would be made into three-dimensional form as amulets to be worn on the body or placed in the tomb with the mummy. While the magic or potency in the words could protect and meet human needs, it was also potentially dangerous, especially in “sensitive” areas such as the sides of a sarcophagus or the walls of the burial chamber. The images used in hieroglyphic writing could spontaneously come alive at any time. Hieroglyphs might consume the food offerings to the deceased. The occupants of the tombs had to be protected from them. Thus the tomb artisans might mutilate the hieroglyphs, cutting snakes into pieces, shortening their tails, or piercing them with knives; leaving the horns off bulls; beheading snakes, lions, scorpions, and bees, or abbreviating them

²¹David, 203.

²²Claude Traunecke, *The Gods of Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 23; cf. Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 86. This belief lingers in Islam in the concept that the very sounds and syllables of the Qur^ʿan mediate the presence of God to the person who reads it.

²³If all memory of the deceased vanished, the spirit would perish, succumbing to the dread “Second Death” or total and permanent obliteration.

in other ways.²⁴ Even in later periods of Egyptian history crocodiles and serpents would be shown with lances piercing the spine. The bodies of human figures might be left off. Birds would be shown without their feet. The snakelike chaos monster Apophis would be portrayed as bound with ropes or killed by spears and knives. Sometimes certain dangerous hieroglyphic symbols might be left out or others substituted.²⁵ Geraldine Pinch suggests that one reason to mutilate some signs was so they wouldn't leave the tomb and withdraw their protective power. Since written messages could at any time transform themselves into actuality, one had to be careful what one wrote down.²⁶

This ability of the content of writing to become real could work itself out in many ways. For example, the Egyptians believed that not even the gods were eternal. They could cease to exist. But they were reluctant to discuss the concept. Egyptian religious writings made only indirect allusions to the concept lest their writing about it bring a premature end to the gods.²⁷

If writing could make something happen, the reverse could also be true. A deliberate decision not to commit something to writing or to erase its already written record, meant that it would be as if the event had never taken place. "Such was the power of the written word that by excluding all mention of a specific deed from a text the deed itself could be understood not to have occurred."²⁸

The removing of something from an already written text is, of course, the easiest aspect to detect. One classic example is the attempt to erase the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut from history by chiseling off her image and name from wall carvings and other historical records, perhaps because the

²⁴Christine El Mahdy, *Mummies, Myth and Magic in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 123; Shaw and Nicholson, 129.

²⁵C. B. Walker, et al., *Reading the Past: Ancient Writing from Cuneiform to the Alphabet* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1991), 91.

²⁶Pinch, 69. Written words could also make something real that had not occurred historically. For example, Egyptians expected their king to be seen as always defeating the nation's enemies. But what if the traditional enemies were at peace with Egypt or the Pharaoh was otherwise unable to go to war? Joyce Tyldesley observes that the kings might borrow traditional inscriptions and insert their own names in them: such "invented or borrowed victories . . . , as they depicted them, became real through the power of art and the written word" (Joyce Tyldesley, *Hatshepsut: The Female Pharaoh* [New York: Viking, 1996], 142). Although she may go too far when she says that a formal inscription by an Egyptian king should never be taken as historical truth without independent confirmation, she does have a point in that even Egyptian historical records usually do have political or religious agendas.

²⁷Erik Horning, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 162, 163.

²⁸Tyldesley, 9.

concept of a strong female ruler did not fit into how the Egyptians thought the universe should be governed.²⁹ "If Hatshepsut's name was completely erased she would have never been, and the succession would now run from Thutmose I to Thutmose III without any female interference."³⁰ The Pharaoh Akhenaten sought to eliminate or reduce the existence of the traditional gods of Egypt by systematically destroying inscriptions containing their names; then his successors attempted to remove him from history by eradicating all of his own records.³¹

Thus, the Egyptians were careful about what they recorded. Because of the magical power inherent in the words themselves, what they recounted could theoretically happen again. As a result, they would have been reluctant to record any event that might threaten their existence. They would try to avoid anything that would disturb what they called *Ma'at*,

a word which may be translated literally as 'justice' or 'truth' [and] was the term used by the Egyptians to describe an abstract concept representing the ideal state of the universe and everyone in it; the status quo, or correct order, which had been established by the gods at the time of creation and which had to be maintained to placate the gods, but which was always under threat from malevolent outside influences seeking to bring chaos and disruption (or *isfet*) to Egypt.³²

Because of this, Egyptian scribes would have been reluctant to mention anything that had already threatened chaos for Egypt. For them, it would never do to record the assassination of a king. The historical account itself might spontaneously burst into being and again plunge the nation into disaster. Perhaps they felt comfortable reporting the harem conspiracy that emerged after the death of Ramesses III³³ only because justice and order did ultimately triumph. Egyptian leadership had rectified the problem and restored order, *Ma'at*. If by some chance the account did suddenly manifest itself into being, the record also contained the resultant return to national order and harmony. The nearest that Egypt came to recording negative events was of the turmoil of the various intermediate periods, but even then it was carefully nuanced. Even then the scribes used such events as examples of what could happen without a strong ruler, and that a powerful king must emerge to set things right.

This understanding of the power of writing would have made Egypt

²⁹Ibid., 210-234.

³⁰Ibid., 216.

³¹Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

³²Tyldesly, 8.

³³For a summary of the incident, see Grimal, 275, 276.

hesitant to compose any account of the Exodus, even on a private level. The Exodus had thrown the nation into utter chaos (Exod 10:7). The Egyptians believed that to write was to employ a technology that controlled the very forces of the cosmos itself.