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MINISTRIES

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Peoples of the Bible: The Egyptians

The Israelites are the people most prominently featured in the Scriptures, but other peoples are mentioned as well. In this series, we examine what the scriptures and history tell us about these other peoples. Who were they, where did they live, what was their culture like, and what did God have to say about them? In this teaching, we will focus on one particular people: the Egyptians.

Who Were The Egyptians?

The Egyptians were descended from one of the grandsons of Noah, named Mitzraim (Genesis 10:6) (*Mitzraim* is also the Hebrew word used for Egypt throughout the scriptures). The most prominent Egyptian cities were Memphis and Thebes, and the Egyptian kingdom we know from history began when these two capital cities, and all of the lands they controlled, united together under one government.

The Egyptians were ruled by a king who was called the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh was typically the son of the previous Pharaoh, and he was believed to be the incarnation of the god Horus (George Hart, *Egyptian Myths* [Austin: University of Texas Press 1990] pp. 14, 29). The Pharaoh's job was to keep all of the Egyptian gods happy by making sure proper offerings were being given in the temples, and also making sure that the land was being ruled justly and competently (Hart 46). The Egyptians believed that when their gods were happy, their land and people would prosper, but when they were not happy, the people would suffer instead. So, the Pharaoh's job was extremely important.

The heart of Egypt was the Nile river valley, which flooded every year, covering the ground with black silt. This silt made very fertile soil, and the Egyptians grew huge quantities of grain in it almost every year (Geraldine Pinch *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002) p. 3). This abundance of food sustained Egypt even through times of famine and war (see Genesis 12:10; 41:56-57).

What Were the Egyptians Known For?

One thing the Egyptians were known for was their gigantic and extravagant architecture. Unlike the Babylonians, who built their giant buildings out of bricks, the Egyptians specialized in building with stone. Their stone temples are among the most impressive in the world, and everyone recognizes the Egyptian pyramids, including the world-famous pyramids of Giza. Since the Pharaoh owned most of the land, and most Egyptians were his paid laborers (see Genesis 47:18-22), he could quickly and easily assemble tens of thousands of workers to build these massive monuments, and many Pharaohs did just that. Over the centuries, Egypt came to be filled with massive stone buildings.

Egypt was also known for its artwork. Their brightly-colored paintings adorned every wall and pillar in their tombs and temples. Egypt also had talented wood carvers and jewelers, whose products were world-renowned. And Egypt's stone carvers made huge and impressive statues, with the Great Sphinx of Giza and the entrance of the Temple of Ramesses II being some of the most famous examples.

How Did The Egyptians Worship?

The Egyptians had perhaps the most complex religion among the ancient peoples of the Near East (Herodotus *The Histories* 2.37.3). They worshiped hundreds of gods, which were depicted as graven images inside of temples, but they also worshiped the Pharaoh, Egypt's king, who was himself considered to be a god. The Pharaoh was also the high priest responsible for the proper worship of all the other gods, and was ultimately the one held responsible for maintaining justice, order, and prosperity throughout the land (Hart 46).

It is hard to pin down which of the Egyptian gods were the most significant, as they had so many, and their significance varied depending on which part of Egypt one was in, and during what time. However, three that seemed to maintain their importance over a large area and for a long time were *Amun-Ra*, the god of the sun, creator of life, and ancestor of all the other gods, *Osiris*, god of both the underworld and the agricultural cycle, and *Horus*, the god of kingship and protection who was embodied in the living Pharaoh. Also, the goddess *Isis* was very popular, as she had power over magic and healing, both of which were very important in Egyptian life.

Speaking of magic, the Egyptians practiced it extensively—everything from fortune-telling to sorcery to necromancy. Egypt prioritized magic perhaps more highly than any other culture; they had many folk tales in which the hero was a magician, rather than a king or a warrior (Geraldine Pinch *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002) p. 161). The Egyptians paid special attention to magic that was spoken, that is, spells and incantations. The so-called “coffin texts” are a good example of this. The Coffin Texts were Egyptian spells that were inscribed upon coffins and inside of tombs. These spells were intended to be spoken aloud to magically assist the dead through their journey to the afterlife. All of these spells also invoke the names of various Egyptian gods, as the gods were believed to be the sources of the spells' power. These kinds of spells may be what is prohibited by YHWH's command in Exodus 23 to “make no mention of the names of other gods” (Exodus 23:13).

There were two other unusual things about Egyptian religion that are worth mentioning. One is that the Egyptians worshiped the sun much more prominently than any other Mesopotamian culture. Egypt's main god, the one that created everything, was the sun god. While the Canaanites, Babylonians, and others did have their own versions of a sun god, they did not consider that particular god to be the most

important or powerful. However, the Egyptians did. This may be why Egypt used a solar calendar (Richard A. Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt*. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization No. 26. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1950]), unlike the lunar calendars of most other nations in the region. The second unique thing Egyptian religion emphasized was life after death. While the other polytheistic religions did believe in an afterlife, it wasn't emphasized much at all, and they rarely mentioned ideas like judgment after death. The Egyptians, on the other hand, strongly believed in life after death, and so they mummified the corpses of their Pharaohs and other important people so that they could bring their preserved bodies with them into the afterlife (see the *Pyramid Texts*, utterances 13-43). They also believed that the dead would be judged, and would only be allowed into paradise if they were found worthy (Hart 55, 57, 60; *Pyramid Texts* utterance 270; *Book of the Dead* plates 3-4).

The final aspect of Egyptian worship we will discuss is that they believed that each of their gods had power over a specific domain—whether that be the Nile river, or the health and fertility of their animals, or the weather, or any number of other important domains. This kind of belief is quite typical among polytheistic religions; what we want to focus on is how YHWH used this belief to show that he was the true God.

When God saved Israel from Egypt during the Exodus, he brought ten different plagues upon the Egyptians. He called these plagues “judgment upon the gods of Egypt” (Exodus 12:12; Numbers 33:4). When YHWH brought plagues upon the domains that the Egyptians believed were controlled by their gods, it showed them who really had the power, and it humiliated their so-called gods. A good example of this was the ninth plague upon Egypt, during which there was darkness over the land for three whole days (Exodus 10:21-23). The Egyptians believed that Amun-Ra, their creator god, inhabited the sun. Every night, when the sun set, they believed that Amun-Ra descended into the underworld and had to overcome many obstacles all night long, fighting enemies who wished to kill him (Pinch 92-93).

Every morning, when the sun rose, that showed that Amun-Ra had prevailed, proving his power and wisdom. But when YHWH kept the sun out of the sky for three whole days, that showed the Egyptians that Amun-Ra was not the powerful deity that they thought he was. YHWH was the one who really had power. Having ten plagues of this kind showed the Israelites and the Egyptians which God was real, and which ones weren't.

How Did the Egyptians Affect God's People?

Egyptians are mentioned in the Bible more than any other people besides the Israelites, probably because of how frequently God's people interacted with them. We have numerous examples of these interactions. Abram's wife Sarai was abducted by one of the Pharaohs, but after God afflicted his house with illness, he let her go (Genesis 12:10-20). Joseph was sold into Egypt as a slave (Genesis 37:28), and after he interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams, he was made second in command over the entire land (Genesis 41:14-43). Jacob's entire family moved into Egypt during a famine (Genesis 46:5-7), only to later become enslaved there for hundreds of years (Exodus 1:8-14). When YHWH miraculously saved the Israelites from their Egyptian slavery, this is what established Israel as their own independent nation for the first time in history. This event is memorialized every year during the festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:17; 13:3-10; 23:15), and it is referenced repeatedly in the laws of Moses (e.g. Exodus 20:2; 29:46; Leviticus 11:45; 19:36; 22:33; 25:38; 26:13; Numbers 15:41; Deuteronomy 4:20, 37; 6:12; 8:14; 20:1). During their journey toward the land of Canaan, there were rebellious Israelites who suggested returning to Egypt rather than depending on God in the wilderness (Numbers

14:3-4), and they were denied access to the promised land because they put more faith in Egypt than they did in God (Numbers 14:26-35; Psalm 95:7-11; Hebrews 3:16-19).

Even after the Israelites entered the promised land, they still sometimes turned to Egypt instead of turning to God. In the early sixth century B.C., Zedekiah, the king of Judah attempted to form an alliance with Egypt to break free of the rule of the Babylonians (2 Kings 24:18-20; Ezekiel 17:11-15). The prophets warned him that Egypt would be of no help (Ezekiel 17:16-21; Jeremiah 38:17-18), and they were right; Babylon completely crushed Judah, exiled their people, and destroyed YHWH's temple (2 Chronicles 36:17-20). So, once again, the Israelites found that their faith in Egypt was misplaced.

What Did God Say About the Egyptians?

God promised Israel that if they kept his commandments, then they would not suffer from the “diseases of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:15; 28:60). The Egyptians, by their own admission, suffered from many diseases—from things as simple as constipation or a headache, to more severe afflictions like skin inflammation and parasitic worms, to permanent disabilities like blindness and paralysis. The Egyptians wrote many texts explaining how to treat these diseases, and these treatments involved reciting prayers and spells as well as preparing exotic medicines and ointments. However, many of these treatments probably did not work, and some of them likely made the patient's condition worse. For example, one Egyptian remedy was to grind granite into a fine powder and sprinkle it into someone's eyes (*Ebers Papyrus* 382); another was to mix human feces with oil, honey, and beer, and apply this mixture to an open wound (*Ebers Papyrus* 541). So, not only did the Egyptians suffer from many diseases, but they likely did not get much relief even when those diseases were treated by a professional. However, God promised the Israelites that they would not suffer from these Egyptian infirmities if they obeyed him:

Exodus 15:26

...If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD [YHWH] your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD [YHWH], your healer.

God gave many prophecies about the Egyptians. In Isaiah, he told the Jews that the Egyptians could not save them from a coming attack by the Assyrians, but that instead, he himself would step in and save Jerusalem:

Isaiah 30:1-3

Ah, stubborn children,” declares the LORD [YHWH], “who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit, that they may add sin to sin; who set out to go down to Egypt, without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation.

Isaiah 30:30-31

...the LORD [YHWH] will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and storm and hailstones. The Assyrians will be terror-stricken at the voice of the LORD [YHWH], when he strikes with his rod.

This happened exactly as YHWH had said. Around 701 B.C., while the Assyrians were besieging

Jerusalem, God killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers overnight. The Assyrian king Sennacherib ordered a retreat, and Jerusalem was saved (2 Kings 19:32-36), but not because of Egypt.

In another prophecy from the book of Jeremiah, YHWH foretold that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar would attack Egypt and kill or capture many of its people:

Jeremiah 43:10-13

...‘Thus says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will set his throne above these stones that I have hidden, and he will spread his royal canopy over them. He shall come and strike the land of Egypt, giving over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword. I shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt, and he shall burn them and carry them away captive. And he shall clean the land of Egypt as a shepherd cleans his cloak of vermin, and he shall go away from there in peace. He shall break the obelisks of Heliopolis, which is in the land of Egypt, and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire.’

(see also: Jeremiah 44:13; 46:14; Ezekiel 29-30)

This attack did occur around 582 B.C. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 10.9.7), just as Jeremiah had said. Many Egyptians and Israelites who had fled to Egypt were killed or captured.

One of the positive things YHWH said about the Egyptians was that one day, they will worship him. Several prophecies describe a time when the Egyptians will serve God alongside Israel (Isaiah 19:18-25). Zechariah’s account of this time is the most detailed: he says that, at this time, any nation that refuses to worship YHWH in Jerusalem during the festival of Sukkot (or “booths” in English) will not get any rain on their land. Since Egypt depends on the Nile River to water their crops, rather than rain, Zechariah says that if Egypt does not worship YHWH, then they will suffer another plague as well:

Zechariah 14:16-19

Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD [YHWH] of hosts, there will be no rain on them. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain; there shall be the plague with which the LORD [YHWH] afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths.

We are, today, still awaiting the time that this prophecy will come to pass, and all people on earth, including the Egyptians, will worship YHWH together.

Who Were Some Significant Egyptians in the Bible?

There are many significant Egyptians mentioned in the Bible. One was Hagar, the mother of Ishmael by Abraham (Genesis 16:1, 15). Another was Asenath, the wife of Joseph and mother of Manasseh and Ephraim (Genesis 46:20). Another was the unnamed Egyptian princess who found the baby Moses in a basket and raised him as her own son (Exodus 2:1-10).

The most well-known Biblical Egyptian was probably the Pharaoh that Moses and Aaron confronted during the Exodus story, though we are never given his name. Because that Pharaoh refused to allow Israel to go free, God brought ten plagues upon Egypt, and this display of power convinced many Egyptians to join Israel when they left the country (Exodus 12:38).

Two more significant Egyptians were Pharaoh Shishak, who in the tenth century B.C. sacked Jerusalem and stole the gold out of the temple (2 Chronicles 12:9), and Pharaoh Neco, who in 609 B.C. killed Josiah, the king of Judah (2 Kings 23:29).

How Did the Egyptians Influence History?

Egypt, under the Pharaohs, was a powerful and influential nation for over 3,000 years (Geraldine Pinch *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002) p. 5)! There is a reason that it is given so much attention, both in modern archaeology, and in the Bible.

Egypt was many times the breadbasket of Mesopotamia. Because of the fertility of the land around the Nile river, Egypt was able to grow a lot more food than the lands further north. There were numerous times that other countries depended on Egyptian grain in order to survive, including during the famous story of Joseph's brothers going to Egypt to buy food (Genesis 42:1-3). The only region nearby that could compete with Egypt's agriculture was the land of Canaan, which got sufficient rainfall to allow for large harvests of fruits and grains (Leviticus 26:3-5; Deuteronomy 11:10-17). But in times of drought, Egypt was the most reliable source of food in the region.

Another major Egyptian contribution to history was their calendar. As we mentioned earlier, Egypt used a solar calendar in which each year was 365 days long (Herodotus *Histories* 2.4), whereas most other cultures used a calendar based on the phases of the moon in which each year could have a different number of days. When Julius Caesar developed his own 365-day calendar for Rome, he was inspired by the ancient Egyptian calendar that he learned about when he visited Alexandria (Lucan, *Pharsalia* Book 10; Macrobius *Saturnalia* 14.3; 15.1-4). This "Julian calendar" is the basis of the modern 365-day calendar that is used all over the world today.

Finally, one of the Egyptians' most significant contributions to history was the invention of paper. The Egyptians made paper out of the papyrus reed, the plant from which "paper" gets its name. Other cultures wrote on stone, clay tablets, and animal skins, but paper is much cheaper than animal skins, and takes much less storage space than clay or stone. Without paper, the modern world would no doubt look very different.

What Can We Learn From the Egyptians?

The story of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt during the Exodus is one that God wanted his people to never forget. Over and over in the Torah, YHWH identifies himself as the one who saved Israel from their slavery to the Egyptians. This salvation is touted as the reason that Israel should be faithful to him and obey his commandments. There is even a holiday, the festival of unleavened bread, in which Israel is commanded to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt for a whole week every single year. God wants his people to constantly acknowledge that serving Egypt brought them only misery, poverty and death, but serving him, the one who saved them, will bring peace, prosperity and life.

We find this exact same message in the writings of Paul, especially in Romans chapter 6. He tells us that we were once enslaved to sin (Romans 6:6), but since our old self was crucified with Christ, we are now set free from that slavery. Since sin is no longer our master, we should no longer obey its passions (6:12). Instead, we should serve God, our savior, as instruments of righteousness (6:13). As he says:

Romans 6:16-18

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Just like the Israelites were set free from slavery to the Egyptians, so that they could serve God so we have been set free from sin, so that we can serve God. Sometimes the Israelites thought that they would be better off under Egypt's rule, even though God had miraculously saved them from that rule. We, too, might sometimes think that we would be better off in our old sinful lifestyle, even though God has saved us. But we should always remember that serving sin leads to death, while serving God leads to life. We should not turn back to our "Egypt," our sinful past, and be enslaved to that again. As the prophets so often said, we cannot rely upon Egypt. We should stay faithful to our Savior and keep his commandments, because he is faithful to us, and he will carry us out of our Egypt and into the Promised Land.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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