

Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus

SCOTT B. NOEGEL
Rice University

The scholarly world has known for some time that the book of Exodus demonstrates a first-hand knowledge of Egyptian customs and beliefs, even if somewhat tendentiously related.¹ This is especially apparent in the account of the ten plagues, which some see as representing an attack against the Egyptian pantheon,² and in the account of Moses' first appearance before Pharaoh's magicians (Exod. 7:8–12). Regarding the latter, for example, not only does the word *הרטומים*, “magicians,” derive from Egyptian *hry-tp* “lector priest, magician,”³ but the trick of turning a staff into a serpent has parallels both in Egyptian literature, in the so-called “wax crocodile story,” and in the repertoire of Near Eastern snake charming tricks.⁴ In addition, J. Currid has demonstrated convincingly that, far from being theologically troubling, the frequent “hardening (lit., making heavy) of Pharaoh's heart,” is a polemical play on the Egyptian belief that Pharaoh's heart would be weighed against the feather of truth before entering the afterlife.⁵

While scholars often rightly note the theological polemic behind such allusions, namely the subordination of Egyptian magic and belief to the God of Israel, to my knowledge, no effort has been made to understand the magicians' tricks and their subsequent failures from the perspective of Egyptian magic.⁶ Nevertheless, as I shall demonstrate, a knowledge of Egyptian magical practice greatly enhances our understanding of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. Therefore, in what follows I shall delineate and discuss several aspects of the Exodus account in the light of their linguistic and thematic affinities with Egyptian magic.

1. See, e.g., J. K. Hoffmeier, “The Arm of God Versus the Arm of Pharaoh in the Exodus Narratives,” *Bib.* 67 (1986), 378–87. For linguistic parallels, see T. O. Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament,” *JAOS* 73 (1953), 144–55.

2. See, e.g., Ziony Zevit, “Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues,” *BR* 6/6 (1990), 16–23 and more recently John D. Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent’: Confrontation in Exodus 7, 8–13,” *BZ* 39/2 (1995), 203–24.

3. A. S. Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch in Its Relation to Egyptian* (London, 1933), 93–94; Jan Quaegebeur, “On the Egyptian Equivalent of Biblical *Harṭummim*,” in Sarah Israelit-Groll, ed., *Pharaonic Egypt, the Bible, and Christianity* (Jerusalem, 1985), 162–72.

4. L. Keimer, “Histoires de serpents dans l'Égypte ancienne et moderne,” *MIE* 50 (Cairo, 1947); D. P. Mannix, “Magic Unmasked,” *Holiday* (Nov. 1960), 32; W. Gibson, *Secrets of Magic: Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1967), 13.

5. John D. Currid, “Stalking Pharaoh's Heart: The Egyptian Background to the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in the Book of Exodus,” *BR* 9/6 (1993), 46–51; “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent,’” 216–24.

6. Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent,’” brilliantly details the Egyptian setting of the stories and their Egyptian parallels, but he does not deal with the particulars of Egyptian magic.

Before doing so, it should be stated that although the magicians' use of "spells" is contrary to Moses and Aaron's method, "which is unaccompanied by any incantation praxis,"⁷ this does not rule out the possibility that Moses and Aaron's acts may have been perceived as magic by the Egyptians, especially the magicians who were steeped in magical lore.⁸ Moreover—and this will anticipate somewhat my conclusions—many of the wonders that Yahweh and Moses perform mirror Egyptian magical acts. Thus, while literarily the stories in Exodus conveyed to the Israelites a theological polemic in Yahweh's defeat over Egyptian magic and belief, they were also not without meaning for the Egyptians, who perceived in Yahweh's wonders a significance within the context of their own belief system. It is this double-edged literary sophistication that I would like to make apparent below.

No doubt a lack of scholarly attention to comparisons between the Exodus account and Egyptian magic is due, at least in part, to the lack of a comprehensive study of Egyptian magic. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that biblical and Near Eastern scholars can welcome the appearance of Robert Ritner's volume on the mechanics of Egyptian magical praxis.⁹

While it is not my intention here to review Ritner's book, scholars should be aware that his study is a veritable goldmine of information on Egyptian magic for the specialist and interested comparativist. The reader will recognize my debt to his important study. With this new set of data at our disposal, then, let us return to Exod. 7:8–12 and look anew at the events recounted from the magicians' perspective.

1. *The Staves and the Serpents*

Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, 'Produce your marvel,' you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh.' It shall turn into a serpent (תנין):" So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as Yahweh had commanded: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the magicians (הרממים) did the same with their spells (להטיהם); each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed their rods.

First, it will be noticed that the event related here cannot have as its basis the often-cited Egyptian snake charming trick which pinches the nerve on the nape of the snake's neck to induce paralysis, for as B. Jacob correctly observed, with these tricks we deal "with snakes that turn into staffs, not the reverse as here—staffs which turned into snakes!"¹⁰ Moreover, Yahweh explicitly commanded Moses to pick up the serpent not by its head, but by its tail (Exod. 4:4).

7. N. M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia, 1991), 37.

8. In this respect it is interesting to note that Christian tradition recalls Moses as "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22).

9. Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Studies of Ancient Oriental Civilization, 54; Chicago, IL, 1993).

10. Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*. Trans. Walter Jacob and Yaakov Elman (Hoboken, NJ, 1992), 254.

Second, it will be noticed that the word for “serpent,” תנין, is not the usual word for this creature, and that when Yahweh prepares Moses for the confrontation with Pharaoh in Exod. 4:3, and again later in 7:15 when the event is recounted, the animal is called a נחש. While to some this points to evidence of variant sources,¹¹ to others it suggests that the תנין of 7:9 is a wholly different reptile, possibly a crocodile.¹² In turn, this reading is then used to bolster the apparent similarity to the Egyptian tale of the wax crocodile. Yet, militating against this view is Exod. 7:15 where תנין and נחש are clearly synonyms.

N. Sarna, on the other hand, has suggested that we read תנין as a possible reference to Pharaoh’s uraeus. According to this view, the event would represent to the king the loss of divine power and apotropaic protection.¹³ It is true that the תנין, which elsewhere appears to mean “sea monster” or “dragon,”¹⁴ must have special significance for Pharaoh, for Ezekiel addresses him as a תנין in 29:3. Nevertheless, Sarna’s view is problematic because the magicians perform their transformation utilizing staffs that have no connection with the uraeus, which typically belongs on Pharaoh’s throne and headdress.

Thus, on the basis of Exod 7:15 which relates the very same event using נחש, I propose that we read תנין in 7:9 as “serpent,” even if it carries an additional nuance. So why the change in wording? In my opinion, תנין was chosen in Exodus 7 because of its strong mythological import. At Ugarit, for example, the *tnn*, “Tannin,” appears as a synonym of the primordial sea monster Leviathan, and its inclusion in several personal names suggests that the Tannin was worshipped.¹⁵ Moreover, the Bible’s references to the Tannin in connection with creation (Gen. 1:21) and the evil serpent whom Yahweh slew (e.g., Job 7:12; Isa. 27:1; 51:9) illustrate the mythological and theological importance of the Tannin. In Egypt, too, the serpent had cosmic connections in the form of the giant serpent Apophis, the divine enemy of Ra, who would battle the solar deity daily as he made his circuit through the underworld.¹⁶ Thus, I suggest that the change from נחש to תנין was made in order to reflect the cosmic importance of the serpent when standing before Pharaoh’s court. This would fit the tendency in the Exodus and conquest narratives to polemicize against theologies of its neighbors by reworking them. To cite just two examples: the parting of the Sea represents a victory over Yam “Sea,” and the decisive battle against the giant Og of Bashan (Num. 21:33–35), a victory over the underworld.¹⁷ Moses’ grasping of

11. I prefer to treat the text as we have it, and not according to hypothetical reconstructions.

12. See, e.g., George Bush, *Commentary on Exodus* (New York, 1943; repr.: Grand Rapids, 1993), 91; A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus* (London, 1908), 41; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem, 1967), 94; Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus* (Cambridge, 1972), 44; Robert A. Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL, 1973), 88–89; James B. Coffman, *Commentary on Exodus: The Second Book of Moses* (Abile, TX, 1985), 87; John I. Durham, *Word Bible Commentary: Exodus* (Waco, TX, 1987), 91; Amos Hakam, *The Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem, 1991), 111 [in Hebrew].

13. Sarna, *Exodus*, 20.

14. The LXX translates δράκων in Exod. 7:9 and ὄφις in 4:3.

15. C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, 498.

16. Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), 36, 41, 119.

17. Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch*, 131; Scott B. Noegel, “The Aegean Ogygos of Boeotia and the Biblical Og of Bashan: Reflections of the Same Myth,” ZAW (in press).

the Tannin, therefore, would be no less theologically significant, as it would represent the casting down of Apophis, an act familiar to Egyptian magicians.¹⁸

Additional support for this theological dimension comes from the verb השליך, “cast down,” used in reference to the staves (Exod. 4:3; 7:9; 7:10; 8:12). The Egyptian verb for “casting down,” *shr*, in addition to appearing in magical exorcisms and spells, also occurs in the Apophis text in reference to the magicians who would take a wax figurine of Apophis and *shr m* “cast (it) down.”¹⁹ The Egyptian magicians, therefore, would have seen Aaron’s casting down of the staff as magically significant.

Nevertheless, we need not concern ourselves with the reason that a synonym was chosen in Exod 7:15, since there נחש clearly functions as a synonym for תנין.²⁰ Moreover, the Egyptians associated serpents in general with magic. Even Pharaoh’s uraeus, itself an embodiment of the cobra goddess Wedjet, was believed to imbue Pharaoh with magical power. For example, note the following hymn to the uraeus recited upon Pharaoh’s coronation:

The doors of the Horizon are opened, their bolts are slipped.
 He (the king) comes to thee, O Red Crown, he comes to thee O Fiery One.
 He comes to thee, O Great One; he comes to thee, O Magician.
 He has purified himself for thee . . .
 He comes to thee O Magician.
 It is Horus who has fought to protect his eye, O Magician.²¹

In fact, serpents of numerous types appear ubiquitously in a variety of Egyptian magical texts.²² Therefore, although like Currid, “I am not convinced that the Exodus writer meant anything more than the rods of Aaron and the magicians turned into large snakes,”²³ I do feel that a latent polemic lurks behind the use of the word תנין, especially when used, as it is in 7:15, in conjunction with Egyptian magic.

Indeed, a knowledge of Egyptian magic thoroughly informs Exodus 7. For example, the serpent trick account is a literary description of what Ritner calls “superposition,” i.e., the placement of one person or animal over another. Known primarily from royal iconographic materials, this magical act appears in a variety of forms, e.g., human over animal, animal over animal, and human over human. In each case the superposition represents the control of the one item over the other. Of greater interest, however, is the representation of one serpent poised atop or striking another. According to Ritner: “When snakes are directed against snakes, opponents are made to function as allies and ‘assistant’ means only ‘subjected opponent.’”²⁴ Ritner’s ob-

18. Does the LXX’s rendering of the Tannin in 4:3 as ὄφις represent an attempt to bring out mythological significance of the Tannin, by way of a play on ἀποφίς “Apopsis”? For the variant Greek translations of the Egyptian word ³pp “Apopsis,” see Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 212.

19. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 48, n. 232.

20. The change also might play on Pharaoh’s use of the verb נתן just previous in 7:9: תנו לכם מופת “Give for yourselves a sign.”

21. The translation is that of H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1978), 107.

22. For an excellent discussion of serpents in Egyptian magical praxis, see Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent,’” 208–12.

23. *Ibid.*, 207.

24. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 128, n. 583.

servation bears significantly on Exod. 7:8–13, for it explains why, despite the magicians' ability to reproduce the first three plagues, they in effect exacerbate the situation. They conjure more bloody water and more frogs, and thus, assist Moses in his plight. In essence, they have become "subjected opponents." It also may explain why the Egyptian people abet the Israelites' cause by lavishing upon them gifts of gold and of jewelry before they depart (Exod. 12:35–36).

2. *The Act of Swallowing*

Exodus 7:12 tells us that Aaron's staff "swallowed" (ויבלע) those of the magicians. In Egypt "swallowing" (*shb* or *ḥm*) was an act of great magical significance.²⁵ Ritner remarks:

Consumption entails the absorption of an object and the acquisition of its benefits or traits. Alternatively, the act can serve a principally hostile function, whereby "devour" signifies "to destroy"—though even here the concept of acquiring power may be retained.²⁶

For instance, we read in spell 612 of the Coffin Texts: "I have swallowed the seven uraei."²⁷ Swallowing gods (like the uraeus) was proscribed by Egyptian magic as a potion for death.²⁸ The "Cannibal Hymn" in the Pyramid Text, spells 273–74, also state:

The King is one who eats men and lives on the gods . . .
The King eats their magic, swallows their spirits.²⁹

See also Coffin Text, spell 1017: "I have eaten Maat, I have swallowed magic."³⁰ In addition, in Egyptian magical parlance, *ḥm* "to swallow," is "to know,"³¹ and "to know" someone is to have power over that person. For example, in the Book of the Heavenly Cow we find Ra's warning against the magicians who employ the magic in their bodies:

Moreover, guard against those magicians who know (*rh*) their spells, since the god Heka is in them himself. Now as for the one who ingests/knows (*ḥm*) him, I am there.³²

Therefore, when Aaron uses the "staff of God" (cf. Exod. 4:20), the symbol of his authority, to devour the staffs and authority of the magicians, the Egyptian magicians would have perceived this as an absorption of their power and knowledge. This explains why the text attributes the act of swallowing to Aaron's "staff" and

25. Cf. the curse for adultery in Num. 5:23–24 which involves the ingestion of a priestly text; noted by Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 109. Interestingly, both Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, 1991), 113; and Currid, "The Egyptian Setting of the 'Serpent,'" 206, see the word "swallow" as a linguistic connector to Exod. 14:16, 14:26, in which the Reed Sea "swallows" the Egyptians.

26. Ritner, *Egyptian Magical Practice*, 103.

27. *Ibid.*, 104.

28. *Ibid.*, 105.

29. *Ibid.*, 103.

30. *Ibid.*, 88.

31. *Ibid.*, 106. Cf. the English expression "hard to swallow" in the sense of "difficult to comprehend."

32. *Ibid.*, 106.

not to Aaron's serpent, a textual peculiarity that clearly bothered the classical rabbis as well.³³ Perhaps it is with the Egyptian conception of "knowledge" in mind, therefore, that we should understand God's repeated words to Moses: "By this (demonstration of power) you shall know that I am Yahweh" (7:17). More on this below.

3. *Grasping the Serpent*

This is the second time that Moses witnessed the transformation of his staff into a serpent, for as the narrator tells us in Exod. 4:4, the first time Yahweh changed Moses' rod into a snake, God commanded him to seize it "by its tail (זַנְבוֹר)." Compare this with the Coffin Text, spell 885: "The snake is in my hand and cannot bite me," and the so-called "Horus on the Crocodiles" stele which depicts the god Horus trampling crocodiles "while firmly grasping in each hand an assortment of noxious animals suspended harmlessly by the tail."³⁴ The significance of Moses' picking up of the serpent in 4:4, therefore, not only "manifests Moses' implicit faith in God,"³⁵ but also provides him with a sign that is certain to strike an ominous chord in the hearts of the Egyptian magicians who were well-versed in their spells. To them, the act was tantamount to the harnessing of the creative and potentially hostile forces of nature.

4. *The Serpent and Speech*

Furthermore, when we consider that an Egyptian magician was a highly literate practitioner whose "physical activities acquire[d] 'non-literal, ritual nuance[s],'"³⁶ and to whom the pictorial characters of the Egyptian script added "a further bond between the written word and the object which it embodies,"³⁷ we may see the snake as the embodiment of the commonest Egyptian word for "statement" (*dd*), written as a serpent (𐩔), a word that appears in Egyptian magical texts as a synonym for "spell."³⁸ Therefore, in the eyes of the Egyptian magicians, the events of Exod. 7:13–18 bore an additional and more subtle nuance of "eating one's (magical) words." When we keep in mind that words were believed to possess a power and efficacy all their own,³⁹ it becomes clear that from the first encounter, Aaron's devouring staff signalled the death knell to the conjurors' abilities.

5. *The Nile Turns to Blood*

Despite their public failure before the king, the magicians, now victims of superposition, do not give up, but instead proceed to imitate the following three

33. See, e.g., BT *Menahot* 85a *Yashar Shemot* 142b.

34. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 106–7.

35. Sarna, *Exodus*, 20.



36. *Ibid.*, 132.


37. *Ibid.*, 249.

38. *Ibid.*, 40–41.

39. *Ibid.*, 35. See also Frederick Moriarty, "Word as Power in the Ancient Near East," in H. N. Bream et al., eds. *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of J. M. Myers* (Philadelphia, 1974), 345–62; Isaac Rabinowitz, *A Witness Forever: Ancient Israel's Perceptions of Literature and the Resultant Hebrew Bible* (Bethesda, MD, 1993).

plagues that Yahweh brings upon the Egyptians. The first of these plagues, of course, turns the Nile into blood. This too has analogues in Egyptian literature, in particular in the Tale of Ipuwer's description of the chaotic unravelling of Egyptian order during the First Intermediate Period (2181–2040 B.C.E.),⁴⁰ and in the story of Rameses II's (1279–1212 B.C.E.) son, also a magician(!), who tells his mother that her water will turn to blood if he loses a magic contest.⁴¹

While these parallels are apt and suggest a certain propriety in turning the Nile (also the god Hapi) into blood, we add substantially more to our understanding of the event's significance for the Egyptians by peering into Egyptian magical texts. In particular, it is highly relevant that the Nile should be turned to blood, for whereas the Israelites regarded blood as the carrier of an individual's life, the Egyptians viewed the Nile as the bringer of life. The famous Hymn to the Nile, for example, opens as follows: "Hail to thee, O Nile, that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive!"⁴² Further, to Egyptian magicians, the word *dšr*, both "blood" and "red," carried negative associations because it was the color of Seth and the serpent enemy of Horus, Apophis.⁴³ Thus, *dšr* "is often a synonym to 'evil'."⁴⁴ This can be seen also by the word's determinatives "evil bird" () and "dying-man" (). It is perhaps no accident, therefore, that the plague of the Nile should occur immediately after the magic contest involving the serpents.

Similarly connected to "red" and "evil" is the writing of the "Oxyrhynchus fish" () with the value *hš*,⁴⁵ which though "derived from the 'red fish' . . . may evoke a visual pun on the word for corpse (*hš.t*)."⁴⁶ To the Egyptian magician, then, red was synonymous with blood and evil, and, by extension, with the Oxyrhynchus fish and death. While such allusions are easily missed by the uninitiated modern reader, the Egyptian magicians would have seen import in the fact that "all the fish in the Nile died" (Exod. 7:21).

The color red also is connected intimately with the breaking of execration vessels. This rite included the sectioning of a bull and the libation of the execration bowl's water with gestures that symbolized strewing the bull's blood. During this procedure both the bloody bull and the red pot became "substitute figures for the enemy, repulsed and dismembered."⁴⁷ Thus, to Pharaoh's magicians, the first plague would have smacked of execration and signalled the imminent destruction of Egypt. When we recall that the Nile was the Egyptians' only source of water, we also should recognize the plague's impact on magical water charms which served to drive potentially dangerous forces such as crocodiles from the water.⁴⁸ In effect, the magicians' ability to perform purification and protection rites using water also came to a sudden halt.

40. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley, 1973), 151.

41. *Ibid.* (1980), 3:148.

42. See John A. Wilson, "Hymn to the Nile," in *ANET*, 372–73.

43. Ritner, 147.

44. *Loc.Cit.*, n. 662.

45. Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (London, 1966), 477, sign-list K4.

46. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 147, n. 662.

47. *Ibid.*, 147.

48. *Ibid.*, 48.

6. *Pour Out The Water*

In addition, in 4:9 Yahweh instructs that if Pharaoh does not heed the previous signs, Moses should take “from the water of the Nile and pour it out on dry ground (ממימי היאר ושפכת היבשה).” This would have made him appear, at least to the magicians, as a funerary priest (*w³h mw*), lit., “water pourer.”

7. *Lice*

The third plague, lice, which the magicians were unable to mimic also gains significance in the light of Egyptian magical praxis. In particular, we note that the plague involved the transformation of lice from sand (8:13). Not only did the transformation into wildlife represent the power of the gods, but “by virtue of its early appearance from the receding flood waters, sand was intimately associated with the creation of the Egyptian cosmos, and hence with all creative acts.”⁴⁹ When used for hostile purposes, sand becomes an “omnipresent weapon for the blinding of enemies, and as such is feared by the deceased and used to repel demons.”⁵⁰ Its multiple uses in Egyptian magic are to be seen in tandem with the ritual shattering of foreign enemies. It is true that the Egyptian texts do not mention the turning of sand into lice, but herein lies the polemic. What to the magicians was a tool for creative magic against the dead, is transformed by Moses into a hostile swarm against the living. Not surprisingly, the magicians are unable to mimic Moses’ performance (8:14).

8. *The Finger of God*

An awareness of Egyptian magical praxis continues to inform the biblical text. For example, in Exod. 8:15, upon first realizing that they are unable to reproduce the lice, the magician-scribes cry out *אצבע אלהים הוא*, “this is the finger of God!” Elsewhere, we find the more common expression *יד אלהים*, “hand of God,” with reference to Yahweh (e.g., Exod. 9:3). The use of “finger” instead of “hand,” therefore, stands out as peculiar. Its placement in the mouths of the magicians suggests that the usage is Egyptian.⁵¹

Indeed, the use of an extended forefinger appears in magic rites, especially those involving the fording of rivers, such as the water spells mentioned above. Typically, one magician recites a spell while another points his finger at the water, thereby stilling the hostile forces in that water. Most intriguing in this respect is this ritual’s application in conjunction with a shepherd-priest (both real and an ivory figurine).⁵² In a fording scene from the tomb of Queen Ti (fourteenth century B.C.E.), for example:

As the herdsmen extend their fingers, they are watched by a standing figure at the left who is dressed in an elaborate kilt and leans upon a staff beside the water. Urged by a herdsmen to

49. *Ibid.*, 155.

50. *Ibid.*, 156.

51. As noted already by Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch*, 66–67. As Yahuda observes, the Egyptian expression appears frequently in the phrases “the finger of Thoth” and “the finger of Seth,” i.e., in connection with the gods of magic and the scribal arts. Interestingly, the biblical expression “finger of God” appears elsewhere only in reference to Yahweh’s scribal activity in making the tablets of the law (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). The Egyptian magicians were, of course, scribes.

52. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* 225–31.

“(Put) your hand over the water” in the ritual gesture, the man replies instead: “Do not speak so much!”⁵³

Another relief from the same Eighteenth Dynasty tomb depicts a herdsman entering a river while carrying a calf on his shoulders in order to induce the other cattle to follow.⁵⁴ Thus, both the water spell and the herdsman serve apotropaically to allow safe passage through a potentially dangerous body of water too deep to cross without guidance.

The Egyptian magicians, who were well-acquainted with such charms and rituals, would have seen the shepherd-priest Moses in a similar light, especially at the fords of the Reed Sea through which his flock, the Israelites, were allowed safe passage (Exod. 14:26–29). Here too we are told that Moses accomplished the parting by extending his arm over the Sea (14:27).⁵⁵ Furthermore, just like the Egyptian priest at the fords of the river in the text above, the Levite Moses commands the Israelites *וְאֵתֶם תְּחַרְשׁוּן*, “be quiet” (14:14). Moses extending his arm, staff in hand, might also relate to a rite depicted in the Temple of Horus at Edfu where we find the picture of a king driving a cattle herd with a serpent-staff.⁵⁶

9. “Knowers of Yahweh”

Throughout the story of the Exodus, Yahweh is greatly concerned with imparting knowledge of himself both to Moses and to the Egyptians. I have mentioned God’s words “By this you shall know (*בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע*) that I am Yahweh” (7:17)—above in reference to swallowing and the magical power of knowing someone. However, Yahweh’s desire for mortal recognition is quite extensive. When Moses first meets Pharaoh, the king refuses to let the Israelites go, for as he states: “I do not know (*לֹא יָדַעְתִּי*) Yahweh, nor will I let the Israelites go” (5:2). In Exod. 6:3 we find God informing Moses that he did not make himself known (*לֹא נִדְעַתִּי*) to his forefathers by the name Yahweh. In 6:7 Yahweh promises Moses “you shall know (*וְיָדַעְתֶּם*) that I, Yahweh, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.” Yahweh also promises in 7:5 that “the Egyptians shall know (*וְיָדְעוּ*) that I am Yahweh when I stretch out my hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst.” Yahweh tells Pharaoh in 7:17 that because of the plague of the Nile “you shall know (*בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע*) that I am Yahweh.” Yahweh also tells Pharaoh that he intends to send the plague of hail “in order that you may know (*בְּעֵבֹר תֵּדַע*) that there is none like me in all the earth” (9:14). The appearance of this expression of God’s will here in plague seven, a theologically significant number both to the Egyptian magicians and to the Israelites,⁵⁷ underscores the importance of Yahweh’s concern with the

53. *Ibid.*, 226. For a pictorial representation, see 229.

54. *Ibid.*, 225.

55. For Egyptian parallels, see Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch*, 66.

56. A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman, “The Significance of the Ceremony *Hwt Bhsu* [The Striking of the Calves] in the Temple of Horus at Edfu,” *JEA* 35 (1949), 98–112. Noted also by Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent,’” 216.

57. See, Scott B. Noegel, “The Significance of the Seventh Plague,” *Bib.* 76 (1995), 532–39. For additional information on the importance of seven in Egyptian magical texts, see Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 13, 24, 46–47, 100, 102, 104, 159–61, 171, 190, 212, 249.

impartation of knowledge. Even at the parting of the Reed Sea, Yahweh proclaims: “Let the Egyptians know (יִדְעוּ) that I am Yahweh . . .” (14:18).

Yahweh’s preoccupation with making known his existence through power also has a counterpart in Egyptian magical texts, not only in the often-cited text of “The God and His Unknown Name of Power,” in which Isis acquires the hidden name of Ra in order to equip herself against magic,⁵⁸ but also in the expression *rh-h.t*, (lit.) “knower of things,” another term meaning “magician.” In essence the “knowers” of Exodus are Yahweh and Moses, who acknowledge God’s power, in much the same way that a *rh-h.t* acknowledges the power of magic. Here, however, there is a polemical reversal, for it is Pharaoh and the Egyptian people who do not “know” Yahweh and his power, even though Pharaoh’s own magicians do. It will be recalled that when the magicians are unable to imitate the third plague they proclaim, “this is the finger of God!” (8:15), an expression closely connected to the magical praxis with which they were familiar. In effect, the “knowers of things,” i.e., the magicians, ironically admit to knowing Yahweh’s power.

10. A Man of Impeded Speech

Regardless of how we explain Moses’ inability to speak effectively, it is obvious from Exod. 4:10, 6:12, and 6:30 that Moses cannot speak clearly. As he states in 4:10, “I have never been a man of words (אִישׁ דְּבָרִים), in times past or now that you have spoken to your servant; I am heavy of mouth (כִּבְד פֶּה) and heavy of tongue (כִּבְד לְשׁוֹן).” While much has been made of his speech impediment in terms of its ironic import, nothing has been said with regard to the polemical posture of Moses’ words in the light of Egyptian magic.⁵⁹ Egyptian magicians, for example, are said to have been eloquent speakers. The Metternich Stela, for example, paints Isis as a veritable word artist.

īnk ʒs.t ntr.t nb(.t) ḥkʒ ir ḥkʒ ʒḥ ḏd mnḥ mdw

I am Isis the goddess, the possessor of magic, who performs magic, splendid of speech.⁶⁰

The word *mnḥ* translated here as “splendid” can also mean “potent,” “excellent,” “pleasing,” and efficacious.⁶¹ Indeed, the God of Magic *Ḥkʒ* also is described at Dendera as *mnḥ mdw*, “excellent of words,” and elsewhere as *nb šm.w nb bīʒ sr ḥpr.w*, “lord of oracles, lord of revelations.”⁶² In this regard it is interesting to note that twice after Moses complains of his inability to speak properly Yahweh tells him that he will play God to Pharaoh (4:16, 7:1), a role that allows him to become a giver of oracles and revelations. Moreover, *ḥkʒ*, “magic,” frequently appears as a synonym for *mdw ntr*, “god’s words,”⁶³ an obvious parallel to Moses’ repeated requests and threats to Pharaoh, which are in fact, God’s words.

58. John A. Wilson, “The God and His Unknown Name of Power,” in *ANET*, 12–14.

59. For another interesting analysis of these expressions, see Jeffrey Tigay, “‘Heavy of Mouth’ and ‘Heavy of Tongue’: On Moses’ Speech Difficulty,” *BASOR* 231 (1978), 57–67.

60. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 34, n. 157.

61. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1962), 109.

62. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 35–36 with n. 167.

63. *Ibid.*, 35.

Note also that Moses' description of himself as one who is not *איש רברים*, "a man of words (also: things)," reminds one of an Egyptian magician who is sometimes called *rh-h.t.*, "a knower of things." When we add to this other terms for magic such as *tp-r3*, "(what is) on the mouth,"⁶⁴ and *hm.t-r3*, "spells on your mouth," we may see in Moses' protests a subtle confession that he never has practiced magic. Perhaps this is why Yahweh becomes angry with him in 4:13, since God, despite Moses' misunderstanding, does not expect him to carry out his mission by using magic.

It is important to recognize that all of the passages in Exodus discussed thus far share in common a context of Egyptian magic. In each case Moses either performs his miracle before the magicians and/or warns the Pharaoh and his courtiers of his impending plague. Nevertheless, the writer's incorporation of the knowledge of Egyptian magic appears to extend beyond the accounts concerning the magicians.⁶⁵

11. *Execration and the Song at the Sea*

At the fords of the Reed Sea, the Israelites sing the Song of the Sea employing images and phraseology with parallels in Egyptian literary texts. The song's closest literary analogy is the so-called "Boating Party" tale (1800 B.C.E.) in which a spoiled princess recovers a pendant which she had dropped into the water with the aid of a lector priest who parts the waters for her by chanting a magical incantation.⁶⁶

Though this literary parallel is striking, a close examination of the Song suggests that it also utilizes imagery commonly found in Egyptian execration texts. A knowledge of Egyptian execration texts has been demonstrated elsewhere in the Bible, for example, in Amos 1:2–2:16 and Jer. 19:1–11.⁶⁷ The identification of allusions to Egyptian execration literature in Exodus, therefore, gains in plausibility. In Exodus 15:6–7 we read:

Your right hand, O Yahweh, glorious in power,
Your right hand, O Yahweh, shatters the foe!
In your great triumph, you smash your opponents!

Observe the incongruity presented in the Song; the drowning of the Egyptians is described as "shattering" (*רעץ*) and "smashing" (*הרס*), words which evoke the smashing (*titi*, *htm*, *tms*, *ptpt*, *hwi*, etc.) of execration bowls. Indeed, from the onset, the poem smacks of an execration text utilizing the vocabulary commonly found in later incantation bowls: "horse and driver he has hurled (*רמה*) into the sea."⁶⁸

The Song's employment of execration language would explain the emphasis it places on the death of the Egyptians, which Sarna noted as unique among the

64. *Ibid.*, 42.

65. If Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch*, 131, is correct in explaining *תהמה* in Exod. 15:5 as an allusion to Tiamat, then the presence of magical nomenclature would be expected.

66. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1: 216–17.

67. A. Bentzen, "The Ritual Background of Amos 1.2–II.16," *OTS* 8 (1950), 85–99; J. K. West, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York, 1971) 244; and more recently, S. M. Paul Amos (Minneapolis, 1991). For a contrary view, see M. Weiss, "The Pattern of the 'Execration Texts' in the Prophetic Literature," *IEJ* 19 (1969), 150–57.

68. For *רמה* in incantations, see, e.g., Isbell, *Corpus of Aramaic Incantation Bowls*, 21–23, 38, 42–43, etc.; Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 50–51, 198–201.

“overwhelming majority of the texts that celebrate the crossing of the sea. . . .”⁶⁹ This emphasis on the death of the Egyptians can be explained in the light of Egyptian execration which makes use of stone vessels as “direct participant(s) in the execration process.”⁷⁰ This perhaps adds an additional nuance to 15:5 in which we hear that the Egyptians sank into the water like an אבן, “stone (vessel).”⁷¹

Typically, the magician would transfer the attributes and power of his enemy to a vessel and then bury it so as to bring about the enemy’s death. Support for the notion that the drowning served as a type of “ritual burial” comes from the peculiar mention of ארץ, “the earth” in Exod. 15:12 in a death at sea: “You put out your right hand, and the earth swallowed them.” If ארץ means “underworld” here, as some suggest,⁷² then we would have an even more direct connection between the burial of the Egyptians at Sea and the Egyptian execration materials. While we do find the image of Death (Mot) receiving the deceased through the gullet also in the myths of Ugarit,⁷³ a magical nuance cannot be ruled out here either, since these references appear in the mythological texts. In addition, nowhere do we find Mot receiving the living as in the Exodus pericope. Moreover, the word “swallow” (בלע or any other) is unattested in Ugaritic. This is important, since the use of בלע, “swallow,” in this passage recalls the magical “swallowing” of Aaron’s staff.⁷⁴

Moreover, in addition to the terms *ṯs.t* and *twt* for execration figures, both meaning “image,” are the generic terms for “enemy,” *ḥfty* and *sbi*.⁷⁵ Therefore, we need not see the mention of the sinking stone in 15:5 as an execration vessel, for the repeated mention of אויב, “enemy,” in Exod. 15:6 and 15:9 also could serve this purpose.

In addition, during execrations a lector priest (magician) would be accompanied by a *ḥ3w-c*, “great fighter priest,” who was responsible for cutting up the Apophis, and for fighting the evil forces on behalf of the lector priest. This might provide an insightful polemical nuance into the mention of Yahweh as an איש מלחמה, “man of war,” in the Song (15:3). Here it is God, and not another magician, who fights on behalf of the Levite Moses.

12. Incineration

Closely tied to the execration rites of the Egyptians was the incineration of both model and living enemies. Ritner observes: “The ritual burning of such figures, as a cultic analog to executions on earth and in the underworld, is a commonplace of temple practice. . . .”⁷⁶ Exod. 15:7 proclaims: “You send forth your burning, it con-

69. Sarna, *Exodus*, 70.

70. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 175–76.

71. For אבן as “stone vessel,” see Exod. 7:19.

72. Sarna, *Exodus*, 80.

73. See, e.g., Marvin Pope, “The Cult of the Dead at Ugarit,” in Gordon D. Young, ed., *Ugarit in Retrospect: Fifty Years of Ugarit and Ugaritic* (Winona Lake, 1981), 168–69.

74. As observed by Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, 1991), 113, and Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent,’” 206.

75. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 185.

76. *Ibid.*, 158.

sumes them like straw.” Like execration victims, then, Pharaoh’s army is smashed, crushed, burned, and buried.

13. *The Pattern of Execration*

To allude to an execration, the text must utilize “the standard Egyptian pattern of attributing impious acts and statements to one’s enemies.”⁷⁷ Consider the following Egyptian example:

See, that foe, etc., who is among men and gods and the inhabitants of the acropolis, has come to break your house, to ruin your gate . . . O Osiris, see that foe who . . . has said: ‘Sore be the pains of your suffering which are on you’ . . . May you break and overthrow your foes and set them under your sandals.⁷⁸

Compare this Egyptian execration with what we hear in the Exod. 15:9.

The foe said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my desire shall have its fill of them. I will bare my sword, my hand shall subdue them.’

In addition, Exod. 14:24 and 15:12 also portray Yahweh as elevated above his enemies. To Ritner, “physical elevation produces political, social, and cosmic domination.”⁷⁹ While the notion of Yahweh as elevated above other gods is common in the Bible, its appearance here in an Egyptian setting and in conjunction with so many other aspects familiar to Egyptian execration takes on an added polemical dimension. The Egyptians, despite their prowess at magic, were themselves the victims of God’s execration.

14. *Cursing or Casting Light*

In this polemical light it also is interesting to note that prior to the parting of the Reed Sea we find the mention of a curse, not in connection with the magicians, but rather in connection with Yahweh. As Exod. 14:20 informs us, the cloud of darkness that Yahweh created “cast a curse/spell (וִאָרַךְ) upon the night, so that one could not come near the other all through the night.”⁸⁰ Though וִאָרַךְ as presently vocalized favors the usual understanding of “cast light” rather than “cast a spell,” the original consonantal text would have been ambiguous. Moreover, the ordinary interpretation fails to explain why, if Yahweh cast light, “one could not come near the other all through the night.” This is a description of darkness and not illumination.

This ambiguity too can be explained by appealing to Egyptian magic, where we find the common word for “spell, curse,” *ḥ*, also meaning “shine, be bright, be effective.”⁸¹ In Papyrus BM 10188, for example, we read: *ḥ.n-y m ib-y*, “I made

77. *Ibid.*, 173.

78. *Loc.cit.*

79. *Ibid.*, 131.

80. From the root אָרַךְ; see E. A. Speiser, “An Angelic Curse: Exodus 14:20,” *JAOS* 80 (1960), 198–200.

81. Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 30.

spells in my heart.”⁸² Indeed, we find in the Egyptian Book of Amduat a subtle play on this other meaning of šh “shine”: $hpr\ n\ mdw\ \text{tn}\ \text{šsp}\ n\ hk\bar{w}\ \text{tn}$, “May your words happen; may your magic shine.”⁸³

Such a pun might lurk behind the appearance of וִיֵאָר in 14:20 and would suggest a role reversal. Moreover, in 14:25 Yahweh’s curse effectively restrains the Egyptians on the shore by causing their chariot wheels to lock ($\text{וַיִּסַּר אֶת אַפְנֵי מַרְכַּבְתֵּיָם}$). Restraint is a common theme in Egyptian execration. The rituals of $rth\ p^c\ t$, “subjugating people,” require that figures of enemies by ensnared in a fishing net, bound, or locked before burning them. Thus, another phrase used to describe this rite is $hnr\ hft.w$, “restraining enemies.”⁸⁴ In essence, the acts which normally would fall to the Egyptian magicians, now fall upon the Egyptian people at the hand of Yahweh.

15. *Blowing the Sea*

The Sea is divided only when Yahweh blows upon the water. Exod. 15:8, for example, states: “with the wind of your nostrils (בְרוּחַ אֶפְיֶיךָ) the waters piled up,” and 15:10: “you blew your wind ($\text{נִשְׁפַּת בְרוּחֶךָ}$), the sea covered them.” Blowing, too, is fundamental to Egyptian magic. As Ritner says: “The notion of transferring invigorating breath is commonplace in offering rituals, which promise the donor the ‘breath of life’ ($t\bar{w}\ n\ h$), and funerary texts recognize the same technique”⁸⁵ Moreover, blowing must be seen as a subset of the magical act of spitting, i.e., as spitting air. Hence, a later Demotic cure for gout: “In addition to this, you must blow (nfy) at him with your mouth.”⁸⁶ The air god Shu, for example, was created by the creator Amon who is said to have “spat out the wind ($t\bar{w}$).”⁸⁷ When seen in this light, Yahweh’s breath becomes a meaningful referent not only to the Israelites, but also to the Egyptians.

16. *Execration and Dread*

Fundamentally associated with Egyptian magic are notions of nrw , “terror,” $qf\bar{b}$, “dread,” and šfy.t , “fear.” For example, one magical text tells us: $\text{šfy.t-k}\ p\ hr.t\ m\ \bar{i}b\text{-sn}$, “fear of you circulates in their heart(s),” and another: $nr\text{-f}\ p\ hr.t\ m\ \bar{i}b.w$, “his terror circulates in hearts.”⁸⁸ The Horus cippi also reads: $shpr\ n\text{-y}\ qf\bar{b}.w\text{-k}\ n\ hk\bar{w}.w\text{-k}$, “create for me your dread by your magic.”⁸⁹ It is this fear and dread that magic ultimately invokes in the heart of the enemy if affected properly.

When we return to Exodus 15 we find a similar concern with how the death of the Egyptian at the Reed Sea brought dread upon Egypt’s neighbors. Exod. 15:14–16 reads:

82. *Ibid.*, 31.

83. *Ibid.*, 30.

84. *Ibid.*, 197, 209.

85. *Ibid.*, 89.

86. *Ibid.*, 88.

87. *Ibid.*, 89.

88. *Ibid.*, 66, n. 301; 195, n. 902.

89. *Ibid.*, 178, n. 828.

The peoples hear, they tremble (יִרְגְּזוּן)
 Agony (חֵיל) grips the dwellers in Philistia
 Now are all the clans of Edom dismayed (נִבְהָלוּ);
 The tribes of Moab—trembling (רָעַד) grips them;
 All the dwellers in Canaan are melting (נִמְגַר).⁹⁰
 Terror and dread (אֵימָתָה וּפְחָד) descend upon them;
 Through the might of your arm they are as still as stone.

Conclusion

A close look at the account recording Moses before the magicians (Exod. 7:8–12) and the Song at the Reed Sea (15:1–18) confirms the remark by Currid that the Exodus account “is remarkably brimming with elements of Egyptian religious and cultural background. Only an author who was well-versed in Egyptian tradition could have composed such a poignant piece.”⁹¹ In addition, these same texts portray the Pharaoh and his magicians as “subjected opponents,” and in a subtle and ironic reversal of roles, as unwilling execration victims. The latter is accomplished by a polemical casting of the demise of the Egyptians in the form of a victory song utilizing imagery from Egyptian execration practices.⁹²

While Moses and Aaron do not employ magic of any kind, the miracles they perform do have Egyptian analogs, suggesting that the Exodus writer made a deliberate effort to allude to Egyptian magical praxis in order to polemicize against it. Such allusiveness bespeaks the literary and polemical sophistication of the ancient author.

It is probable that a closer look at other biblical stories involving Egyptians will yield further insights when seen in the light of Egyptian customs and beliefs.⁹³ As new data become available, the biblical scholar will surely benefit.

90. Note here another possible allusion to the incineration (here “melting”) of execration victims.

91. Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent,’” 224.

92. The very act of reversal and overturning, *shd* in Egyptian, also carries magical import as it appears with some frequency in execration texts. See Ritner, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 168.

93. Note that the motif of ritually bound captives also might lie behind the often repeated formula “Let my people go!” For Egyptian magical counterparts, see Ritner, *Egyptian Magical Practice* 113–36.

We know from Exodus that Moses was a prince in Egypt and raised in Pharaoh's court before he left Egypt, so it is highly likely he would have been trained in the ways of the lector priests and possessed his own heqa scepter. The Very Strange History of the Easter Bunny. Noegel, Scott B., "Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus", In Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society, Vol. 24: 45-59, 1996, (<https://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/PDFs/articles/Noegel%2019%20-%20JANES%201996.pdf>). Osman, Ahmed, "Egypt Remembers: Ancient Accounts of the Great Exodus", Ancient Origins, November, 2014, (<https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-important-events/egypt-remembers-ancient-accounts-great-exodus-002295>). Moses is the star of the Exodus show. Without him, the whole production falls apart, and we just end up with a golden-calf-worshipping extravaganza. That might be fun for a theme party, but it just doesn't sit right in the Bible. The point of all the magic? To allow Moses to challenge Pharaoh. Okay, so God has given him some cool miracles to perform. But Moses eventually comes into his own. He becomes a capable leader who judges for the Israelites and leads them through the perils of the desert. This relationship between Moses and his people will come to define a big part of the rest of the Exodus story in Numbers and Deuteronomy. Follow it through and see how it changes. We dare you.