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Abstract

Exodus 1–15 repeatedly shows familiarity with Egyptian traditions: the biblical motifs of the hidden divine name, turning an inanimate object into a reptile, the conversion of water to blood, a spell of 3 days of darkness, the death of the firstborn, the parting of waters, and death by drowning are all paralleled in Egyptian texts, and, for the most part, nowhere else.

Before reaching the substantive portion of this article, I begin with a few introductory notes. (a) The present article is the natural follow-up to my earlier essay, “Moses as Equal to Pharaoh” (Rendsburg 2006), which dealt with aspects of Exodus 1–15 that evoke Egyptian motifs relevant to Horus, the god of kingship, and/or to the Pharaoh, as royal figure. In this second article, we will focus upon reverberations of Egyptian magical and (additional) literary motifs within the Exodus account. (b) I ask the reader’s forbearance regarding the title, “Moses the Magician,” which should be understood loosely, since not every feature to be discussed herein relates to the role of the Egyptian lector-priest or magician-priest per se. Nevertheless, as we shall see, such matters dominate the biblical story—and besides, the alliterative title resonates felicitously. (c) Many of the items to be presented in this article have been treated by others before me (see espe-

cially Zevit 1990; Noegel 1996; Currid 1997: 83–120), though hopefully this essay still will present some new perspectives, including, I believe, one particular item (see below §8) hitherto not commented upon, at least to the best of my knowledge. (d) Finally, my method in this article, as was also the case in the first article, is to consider Exodus 1–15 as a narrative whole,¹ and to proceed through the biblical text in its canonical order.

§1. We start with Exod 3:13–15, which constitutes the second of Moses’s four objections to God, along with God’s response, in the scene atop Mt Horeb (see Exod 3:1; identified with Mt Sinai in later Jewish tradition). Moses anticipates that the people of Israel will ask him for God’s name: וְאָמְרוּ-לִי מִהְּשֵׁמוּנִי אֵלֶּהָם “and they shall say to me, ‘What is his

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¹ Though clearly the Song of the Sea in the final chapter is an earlier poetic version (indeed most likely the oldest piece of literature in the entire Bible), predating the prose account in Exodus 14.

name?’—what shall I say to them?’”² God responds not with any of the standard divine names used in the Bible—יהוה “YHWH,” אֱלֹהִים “Elohim” (“God”), שַׁדַּי “Shaddai,” etc.—but rather proclaims אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה *’ehye ašer ’ehye* “I am that I am” (v. 14), a name used nowhere else in the Bible, shortened later in the verse to the simple אֶהְיֶה *’ehye* “I am”.³ This unique divine name is to be understood as “the unknown name” of Yahweh, a parallel to “the unknown name” of Ra, as narrated in Pap. Turin 1993 (c. 1300 B.C.E.).⁴ In this Egyptian myth, Isis seeks to learn the secret name of Ra, though the great god refuses, with the comment, “My father and mother told me my name. I have hidden it in my body since birth, so as to prevent the power of a male magician or a female magician from coming into existence against me” (lines cxxxii.11–12).⁵ Isis, in turn, produces a venomous snake, which bites Ra, thereby forcing him—with no alternative, as he suffered tremendously from the burning poison—to ultimately disclose his name: “The great god announced his name to Isis, the Great One of Magic” (line cxxxiii.14).

The parallel between the two stories is clear: in both cases the great god has a secret name. But the key differences are illuminating:

- (a) In the biblical account, God is not fearful of disclosing his name: Moses asks, and God divulges—because in the biblical conception of the single deity, Yahweh has no fear of falling under the influence of magical praxes (see, for example, Num 23:23). In the Egyptian story, by contrast, Ra explicitly declares his dread of the powerful magicians, and hence he does everything “humanly” possible not to divulge his name.⁶
- (b) In the biblical story, not only does God reveal “the unknown name” to Moses, but the reader of the story learns the name as well—again, because there can be no concern with magical abuse or misuse of this appellation. In the Egyptian tale, by contrast, the reader does not learn the special name of Ra; he/she learns only that Isis learned the name.

§2. The Exodus narrative continues with Moses’s third objection to God atop Mt Horeb, namely, that the people will not believe him when he returns to Egypt: וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וְיִזְחָק לֵאמֹר וְהָיוּ לֹא־יִאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי: “And Moses answered, and he said, ‘but behold, they will not believe me, and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say, “YHWH did not appear unto you”’” (Exod 4:1). So, how best to impress people in Egypt with one’s power, to instill belief in them? The answer: to empower the hero with the ability and capacity associated with the lector-priest. Accordingly, God instructs Moses at this point to cast down his shepherd’s staff, which turns into a snake (שֶׁנָּה), and then, upon Moses’s grasping the snake by the tail, it reverts to a staff (vv. 2–4). A very similar maneuver is

² Translations of the Hebrew herein are my own. I also have translated the shorter Egyptian passages quoted, though for longer Egyptian texts I have relied on the translations of others, as indicated.

³ This short form may be alluded to in one other passage, Hos 1:9.

⁴ For the four other sources, all Ramesside, all from Deir el-Medina, see <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/literature/isisandra.html> (along with transliteration of Pap. Turin 1993).

⁵ Adapted from the translation of Robert K. Ritner in *COS*, 1.33–34. For other versions, see Wilson (1969: 12–14) and McDowell (1999: 118–120). For the standard edition, see Pleyte and Rossi (1869–1876: 1.173–180) (with Plates CXXXI–CXXXIII, LXXVII+XXXI in vol. 2).

⁶ On the fear expressed by the Egyptian gods concerning the threat of magic directed against them, see Ritner (1993: 21–22).

employed by the chief lector-priest (*hry-tb*) Webaoner and the caretaker of his gardens in “The Wax Crocodile” story, the second of the tales appearing in Papyrus Westcar (Pap. Berlin 3033, c. 1600 B.C.E., though the composition is several centuries earlier), as a means to avenge the indiscretions of the local townsman⁷:

When day broke, and the second day came, the caretaker informed Webaoner of the matter Then he lit a fire and said, ‘Bring me my chest of ebony and electrum’, and he opened it and made a crocodile of wax seven fingers long. He read out his magic words saying . . . ‘If anyone comes to bathe in my lake . . . the townsman’. Then he gave it to the caretaker, and he said to him: ‘After the townsman goes down to the pool, as is his daily fashion, you shall cast the crocodile after him’. The caretaker went forth, and he took the crocodile of wax with him.

After night fell, the townsman returned as was his daily fashion, and the caretaker threw the crocodile of wax behind him into the water. At once it grew into a crocodile of seven cubits, and it took hold of the townsman.

Webaoner tarried with His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated, for seven days, all the while the townsman was in the lake without breathing. After the seventh day came, His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated, came forth, and the chief lector-priest Webaoner placed himself in his presence and said to him, ‘May Your Majesty come and see the marvel which has taken place in Your Majesty’s time’. His Majesty went with Webaoner. He called out to the crocodile and said, ‘Bring back the townsman’. The crocodile came out of the water. Then the chief lector-priest Webaoner said, ‘Open up!’ And he opened up. Then he placed. . .

Said His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated, ‘This crocodile is indeed fearful!’ But Webaoner bent down, and he caught it and it became a crocodile of wax in his hand.

To be sure, “The Wax Crocodile” tale does not mention Webaoner’s grasping the crocodile by the tail, and of course Moses’s action atop Mt Horeb involves a snake. But there is additional data to flesh out the relationship between the two stories. On the biblical side, we note that when Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh and produce this wonder, the word נָחָשׁ “snake” is not used, but rather the term תָּנִין “crocodile” occurs⁸: וַיִּבְּא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֹן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁלַךְ: אֶהָרֹן אֶת־מִטְּהוֹ לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וּלְפָנֵי עֲבָדָיו וַיְהִי לְתָנִין: “and Moses and Aaron came unto Pharaoh, and they did such, as YHWH had commanded; and Aaron cast-down his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a crocodile” (Exod 7:10).

The difference in word usage is to be explained on two grounds: (a) in the wilderness setting of Mt Horeb, the snake is appropriate; while in the Pharaoh’s court, which could never be too far from the Nile, the crocodile is more suitable (see already Cassuto 1967: 94); and (b) a holistic approach to the narrative suggests that an “upgrade” is operative here, for while the snake trick is clearly something special, how much more impressive is the transformation of the staff into a crocodile.⁹ On the Egyptological side,

⁷ Standard editions of the entire Papyrus Westcar are Blackman-Davies (1988) and (Lepper 2008). The translation here, excerpted from the second tale, is adapted from that of William Kelly Simpson in Simpson (2003: 13–16) (in particular pp. 15–16). The reader should be aware that the manuscript is much more fragmentary than my clean prose would suggest (especially in this selection, col. 2, line 15, through col. 4, line 3), though the narrative thread is clear nonetheless. For other English renderings, see Parkinson (1997: 102–109) (esp. pp. 107–108); and Quirke (2004: 77–81) (esp. pp. 78–80) (with transliteration). See also the German translation by Lepper (2008: 29–35) (esp. pp. 31–34) (with transliteration).

⁸ There is a debate amongst scholars concerning the meaning of the word תָּנִין, though in my opinion “crocodile” is the only possible option here and in other Egyptian contexts (e.g., Ezek 29:3, 32:2). For those in agreement with this conclusion, see the references in Noegel (1996: 47, n. 12). For full treatment, notwithstanding a contrary view, see Cohen (1991).

⁹ The source-critical approach assigns Exodus 4:1–16 to the Yahwist account, which uses נָחָשׁ “snake” both here and in its creation account in Genesis 2–3, and Exodus 7:1–13 to the Priestly source, which uses תָּנִין “crocodile, sea-monster” both here and in the first creation account in Genesis 1, and which elevates Aaron to greater prominence. For convenient orientation, see Friedman (2003: 130 n. *).

we may note a series of seals portraying an individual (most likely a magician-priest) holding crocodiles by the tail, one in each hand; see Fig. 18.1 for two examples¹⁰—in addition to the famous Horus stelae of the god Horus holding snakes, scorpions, etc., in similar fashion (see Rendsburg 2006: 213–215). A chart may be useful here to summarize the evidence:

Action	Biblical account	Egyptian evidence
Snake from inanimate to animate	Moses atop Mt Horeb	
Holding snake by the tail	Moses atop Mt Horeb	Horus stelae
Crocodile from inanimate to animate	Moses and Aaron before the Pharaoh	Webaoner in “The Wax Crocodile”
Holding crocodile by the tail		Egyptian seals (from Egypt and Canaan)

Finally, we note the response by the Egyptians in the court: וַיִּקְרָא גַם־פִּרְעֹה לַחֲכָמִים וְלַמְכַשְׁפִּים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם־הֵם חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלִהְיֵיהֶם כֵּן: “and Pharaoh also called the wise-men and the sorcerers; and they did likewise, the lector-priests of Egypt, with their spells thus” (Exod 7:11). Which is to say, naturally the Egyptian lector-priests are able to reproduce the wonder produced by Moses and Aaron, since, as we learn from “The Wax Crocodile” story, the ancient Egyptians themselves believed that such individuals could transform an inanimate object into a crocodile.¹¹

§3. We turn now to the extended narrative concerning the Ten Plagues, several of which evoke Egyptian tropes. The first of these is Plague One, turning the Nile into blood: וַיַּעֲשׂוּכֶם מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן כְּאֲשֶׁר | צִוָּה יְהוָה יִרְמֵה בַּמַּסָּה וַיִּדְּ אֶת־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּאֵר לַעֲיֹנִי פֶרְעֹה וְלַעֲיֹנֵי עַבְדָּיו וַיִּהְיֶהכֶן: “And Moses and Aaron did thus, as YHWH commanded, and he raised the staff, and he struck the water that is in the Nile, before the eyes of Pharaoh and before the eyes of his servants; and all the water that is in the Nile was turned into blood” (Exod 7:20). The Egyptian parallel is well known, from the “Admonitions of Ipuwer,” the sage who described the chaotic state of the land, with reference to either the First Intermediate Period or the Second Intermediate Period, though the sole surviving manuscript, Pap. Leiden 344, dates to the 19th Dynasty, centuries later.¹² The key passage reads as follows: *iw ms utr w snf swri.tw im.f nyw.tw m rmt in.tw mw* “Indeed, the river is blood, yet one drinks from it; one turns away from people, yet one thirsts for water” (col. 2, line 10) ... *[iw]ms dšrt ht t3 ḥšwt ḥb3 [. . .] psdt rwt y ty.ti n kmt* “[In]deed, the desert is throughout the land, the nomes are ravaged; foreign-tribes (lit. “bowmen”) have come into Egypt” (col. 3, line 1). Note not only the parallel to the first plague, but also the equally important fact that the upheaval is associated with the presence of foreigners in the land.¹³

¹⁰ For examples from Egypt, see Quibell (1898: pl. 30, no. 26) (from the Ramesseum); Petrie (1906: pl. 11, no. 222) (from Tell el-Yehudiyeh); and Petrie (1909: pl. 34, no. 92) (from Memphis). For seals of this sort from the land of Israel, see Keel (1997): Achsib, no. 115; Tell el-Aḡul, nos. 200 and 996; and Akko, no. 115; and Keel (2010): Beth-Shan, no. 87; Beth-Shemesh, no. 10; and Dor, no. 26. For a general survey, including reproductions of some of the above seals, see Münger (2003: 69), fig. 2, nos. 11–15. I am extremely grateful to Dr Münger for directing my attention to these seals and for this wealth of bibliography.

¹¹ For additional aspects of this episode, see Rendsburg (2006: 209–210).

¹² For discussion of these matters, see Enmarch (2005, 2008), now the standard treatments of this important composition. English translations include Lichtheim (1973: 149–163), Parkinson (1997: 166–199), Nili Shupak in *COS*, 1.93–98; Vincent A. Tobin in Simpson (2003: 188–210); and Quirke (2004: 140–150) (with transliteration of the text).

¹³ For another reference to water turning to blood in an ancient Egyptian text, namely Setne II (on which see below, §5), see Lichtheim (1973–1980: 3.148); and Robert K. Ritner in Simpson (2003: 485). The parallel is less apt, though, since it is the Nubian magician’s mother’s water which will turn to blood, should he be defeated whilst performing sorcery in Egypt.

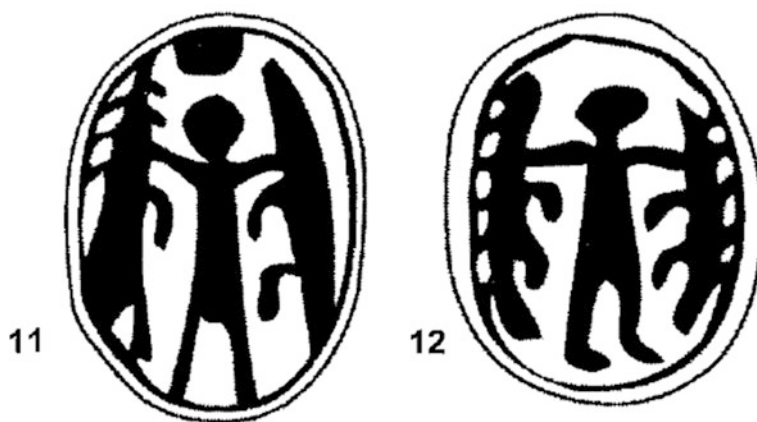


Fig. 18.1 Seals depicting an individual (most likely, a magician-priest) holding two crocodiles by the tail, one in each hand. Original publications: on the left, Petrie 1909: pl. 34, no. 92 (from Memphis); on the right, Petrie 1906: pl. 11, no. 222 (from Tell el-Yehudiyeh). The whereabouts of the former is now unknown. The latter is housed in the Petrie

Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, catalogue no. UC61221, and may be viewed via online search at: <http://petriecat.museums.ucl.ac.uk/search.aspx>. My gratitude to Dr Alice Stevenson for this information and to Prof Stephen Quirke for additional assistance

§4. Plagues Three and Four both involve insects, כְּנִים “lice” and עָרָב “gnats, flies,” respectively.¹⁴ In these two instances, the supporting Egyptological evidence comes not from Egyptian sources directly, but rather from Herodotus’s detailed description of the land of Egypt in *The Histories*, Book Two. In section 37, he reports as follows: “Their priests shave the whole body every other day, that no lice or aught else that is foul may infest them in their service of the gods”¹⁵; while in section 95, he states very succinctly: “Gnats are abundant,”¹⁶ after which follows a long section detailing how the Egyptians protect themselves from this pest. In light of these statements, the presence of these two annoyances within the plagues account in the book of Exodus is rather appropriate. Also noteworthy is Herodotus’s observation regarding the priests who shave

their bodies regularly, so as not to become impure, and hence be disqualified from temple service; this will explain the presence of the *hartumim* = Eg., *hry-tp* “lector-priests” in the short accounts of Plague Three and Plague Six.

The key passage in the former pericope is the following: וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־לָוֶה הַחֲרָטָמִים בְּלִטְיָהֶם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת־הַכְּנִים וְלֹא יָלְדוּ וַתְּהִי הַכְּנָם בְּאֲדָם: וּבַבְּהֵמָה: “And the lector-priests did thus, by their spells, to bring-out the lice, but they were not able; and the lice were upon human and beast” (Exod 8:14). Ironically, had the *hartumim* succeeded in their attempt to duplicate Moses’s and Aaron’s action (see vv. 12–13), the lice would have been even more present. Though even without such action, the lice that Moses and Aaron brought forth already had infested “human and beast,” which would have included the priests presumably.

The second relevant verse occurs later, within the Plague Six pericope: וְלֹא־יָקְלוּ הַחֲרָטָמִים לַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי הַשּׁוּחִין וְכִי־הָיָה הַשּׁוּחִין בַּחֲרָטָמָם וּבְכָל־מִצְרָיִם: “And the lector-priests were not able to stand before Moses, on account of the boils; for the boils

¹⁴ For the identification of עָרָב as “gnats, flies,” see Rendsburg (2003).

¹⁵ Translation of Godley (1921–1924: 1.319). For discussion, see Lloyd (1976–1988: 1.165–166).

¹⁶ Translation of Godley (1921–1924: 1.381). For discussion, see Lloyd (1976–1988: 1.382).

were upon the lector-priests and upon all of Egypt” (Exod 9:11). While not lice, the boils constitute a different skin affliction, which also would have rendered the Egyptian priests unable to serve the gods. To my mind, it is not a coincidence that the contest between the *ḥartumim*, on the one hand, and Moses and Aaron, on the other, ends with the third plague of lice, and that the *ḥartumim* reappear only once (in a cameo appearance, as it were), during the telling of the sixth plague of boils. The attack on the lector-priests by extension represents an assault on the heart of Egyptian religion, for without the priestly service in the temples, the cults are inoperative, the deities are ineffective, and all of Egypt descends into turmoil.

- §5. Our next topic is Plagues Eight and Nine, the plagues of locusts and darkness, respectively. The two are clearly distinct, but they share the motif of darkness descending upon the land:

וְכָל אֲתֵנִי קַלְהָאֲרֵץ וְתַחֲשׁוּף הָאָרֶץ וְיֹאכַל אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב
הָאָרֶץ וְאֵת כָּל-פֶּרִי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר הֹתִיר הַבְּקָד וְלֹא-יִנְוֹתָר
כָּל-יֶרֶק בָּעֵץ וּבְעֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

And it [sc. the locust swarm] covered the eye of the whole earth, and the earth was darkened, and it ate all the vegetation of the land and all the fruit of the trees, which the hail left over; and not a single green was left on the trees or on the vegetation of the field, in all the land of Egypt. (Exod 10:15)

וְכָל מַשָּׁה אֲתֵנִי עַל-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְיָהִי חֹשֶׁךְ אֲפֹלָה בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ
מִצְרָיִם שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים:
לֹא-רָאוּ אִישׁ אֶת-אֶחָיו וְלֹא-קָמוּ אִישׁ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים
וְלֹקְלֵבְבִי יִשְׁרָאֵל תְּהִי אִוָּר בְּמוֹשְׁבֵתָם:

And Moses extended his hand towards the heaven, and there was a deep darkness in all the land of Egypt (for) 3 days. One could not see his fellow, and no one rose from his place (for) 3 days; and for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings. (Exod 10:22–23)

In the first verse above, note that “the eye of the whole earth” is a Hebrew quasi-calque on the Egyptian phrase *ʾi:t r* “the eye of the sun,” a metaphor for Ra, and by extension,

the land of Egypt (Erman-Grapow 1926–1931: 1.107; Yahuda 1933: 62–63; Rendsburg 1988: 7). Indeed, Targum Onqelos renders the Hebrew phrase *עַיִן שֶׁמֶשׁ כָּל אֶרֶץ* “the eye of the sun of the whole earth,” inserting the word *שֶׁמֶשׁ* “sun” in the middle of this phrase, thereby departing from its typical word-for-word rendering (Rendsburg 1990).

The relevant Egyptian texts here are the “Prophecy of Neferti” and “Setne Khamwas and Si-Osire” (=Setne II). The former is a Middle-Egyptian composition, though it is known to us only from New-Kingdom copies, to wit, the complete 18th-Dynasty Pap. St Petersburg 1116B (whose lines are cited below), along with many fragmentary copies from the 19th and 20th Dynasties.¹⁷

The pertinent passage reads as follows: *itn ḥbs nn psd.f m3ḥ rhyt nn ‘nh.tw ḥbsw šn* “the sun-disc is covered, it does not shine for people to see; no one can live, when the clouds cover” (line 25) ... *styw ḥtyw t3 iw ḥrw ḥpr ḥr i3bt iw 3mw h3t r kmt* “Syrians (*styw*) are throughout the land, enemies emerge in the east, Asiatics (*3mw*) have come-down into Egypt” (lines 32–33). Once more we note how the disorder, characterized by the concealment of the sun, is connected to the arrival of Syrians/Asiatics (i.e., Semites).

The second parallel appears in the late Demotic text “Setne Khamwas and Si-Osire” (=Setne II) (Pap. British Museum 604 verso). This composition relates a series of stories concerning Setne Khamwas, son of Rameses II, high priest of Memphis, and renowned magician. While the text is late (indeed, the manuscript dates to the first century C.E., based on the information provided on the recto), and indeed the

¹⁷ The standard editions are Goedicke (1977) and Helck (1992). For English translations see Lichtheim (1980: 138–151), Parkinson (1997: 131–143), Nili Shupak in *COS*, 1.106–110, Vincent A. Tobin in Simpson (2003: 214–220), and Quirke (2004: 135–139) (with transliteration of the text).

traditions concerning Setne Khamwas grew over the course of time,¹⁸ a number of the motifs hark back to earlier Egyptian tropes.¹⁹ The relevant episode within the narrative actually concerns not Setne Khamwas, but rather his son Si-Osire, who in fact surpasses his father in wisdom and magic. In the course of this story, an unnamed Nubian magician states the following: “Were it not that Amun would find fault with me, and that the lord of Egypt might [punish me], I would cast my sorceries upon Egypt and would make the people of Egypt spend three days and three nights seeing no light, only darkness.”²⁰ In short, we have here another Egyptian tale centered on darkness, in fact, specifically 3 days of darkness, in accordance with the biblical description of the ninth plague.

§6. The culminating plague, as is well known, is the death of the firstborn, narrated in Exod 11:1–10, 12:29–30.

וְהָיָה בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה יְיָוְהָהֹרָה הָקָה כָּל־בְּכוֹרֵי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם מִבְּכֹר מִבְּכָרָה פָּרֹעַ
הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל־כִּסְאוֹ עַד בְּכוֹר הַשִּׁבְיָה אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית הַבּוֹר וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה:

And it was, in the middle of the night, and YHWH struck all the firstborn of the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, unto the firstborn of the captives who are in the house of the pit, and all the firstborn of the animals. (Exod 12:29)

The same motif occurs in Egyptian funerary literature, both the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom period and the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom.²¹ The relevant passages

from these collections were brought to the attention of scholars by Mordechai Gilula (1977):

- (a) Pyramid Texts, par. 399a–b (within the “Cannibal Hymn”) from pyramids of Unas, c. 2350 B.C.E., and Teti, c. 2320 B.C.E.

(*wnis*)/(*tti*) *pī wd' mdw hn' imn rn-f / hrw pw n rḥs smsw*

(Sethe 1908–1922: 1.208; see also Faulkner 1969: 81)²² (see Fig. 18.2)

It is the king who will be judged with Him-whose-name-is-hidden on this day of the slaying of the first-born (*smsw*). (Unas 508//Teti 322)

- (b) Coffin Texts, §178p (Spell 573) (c. 2000 B.C.E.)

- from Asyut [Siut] coffin, S1C, inner coffin of *msht* = Cairo 28118
- parallel: Asyut [Siut] coffin S2C, outer coffin of *msht* = Cairo 28119

ink wd' mdw hn' imn rn-f / grḥ pw n rḥs wrw

(de Buck 1935–1961: 6.178; see also Faulkner 1973–1978: 2.176) (see Fig. 18.3)

I am he who will be judged with Him-whose-name-is-hidden on this night of the slaying of the first-born (*wrw*).

- (c) Coffin Texts, §163b–c (=Spell 136) (c. 2000 B.C.E.)

- from Saqqara coffin Sq3Sq, coffin of *snny* in Saqqara storeroom with three parallels:
 - B2L, outer coffin of *gw3-tp*, from el-Barsha = BM 38039
 - B2P, inner coffin of *spi*, from el-Barsha, now in the Louvre²³
 - Sq4C, coffin of *hnw*, from Saqqara = Cairo J39052

¹⁸ This includes the transformation of the title *stm* “priest” (>Setne) into part of the protagonist’s name.

¹⁹ In addition to which, one of the tales is known from an earlier Aramaic version found at Elephantine; see Robert K. Ritner in Simpson (2003: 471), with n. 1.

²⁰ Translation of Lichtheim (1980: 138–151) (in particular p. 144). For another rendering, see Robert K. Ritner in Simpson (2003: 471–489) (in particular p. 480). The standard edition remains, Griffith (1900), with translation and transliteration on pp. 142–207.

²¹ For basic orientation into these two genres, see Hornung (1999: 1–6, 7–12), respectively.

²² For a different approach on how to render this passage, see Allen (2005: 51, 91). Eyre (2002: 85) includes nary a comment about this line.

²³ The sigla for these coffins (S1C, B2L, etc.) are those employed by de Buck. In this particular case, for coffin B2P, de Buck did not supply a museum accession number, beyond indicating its current location in the Louvre.

Fig. 18.2 Pyramid Text §399a–b, from pyramids of Unas [W] and Teti [T], from Sethe (1908–1922: 1.208). Used with kind permission of Georg Olms Verlag

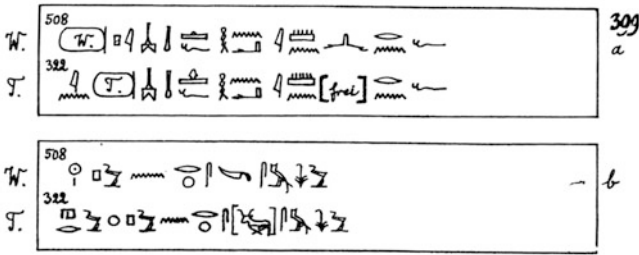
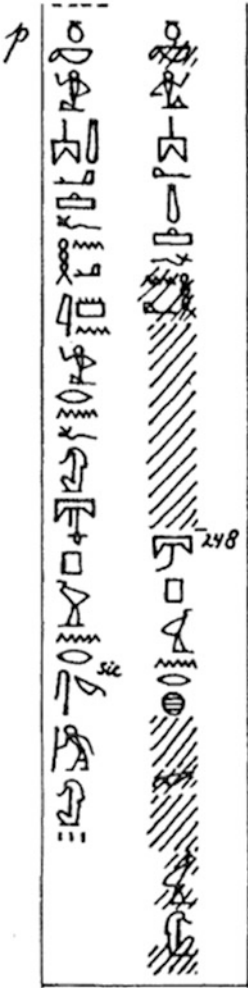


Fig. 18.3 Coffin Text §178p, from de Buck (1935–1961: 6.178). Used with kind permission of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago



Now, to be sure, we know very little about “this day of the slaying of the first-born” (in the first text above), or with even greater relevance “this night of the slaying of the first-born” (in the second text), or the composite version with both “night” and “day” (in the third text). In addition to the change from *smsw* in the Pyramid Texts to *wrw* in the Coffin Texts, one also should note that the latter is followed by the “deity” determinative, in all copies and in all instances (see Figs. 18.3 and 18.4). The same holds for the expression *imn rn-f* “He-whose-name-is-hidden” in those instances where the phrase is extant (§178p [again, see Figs. 18.3 and 18.4] and §163a [not included above]).

Regardless of how this echo of a myth is to be understood, one will agree with Gilula (1977: 95): “These passages are strong evidence that a mythological tale once circulated in which some or all of the first-born in Egypt—whether gods, mortals or animals—were slain on a certain day or night. Such a myth may very likely lie in the background of the biblical account.”

§7. While the ten plagues suffice to demonstrate Yahweh’s might and salvific power (that is, from the perspective of the biblical narrator and his audience), the story line allows for one ultimate act which eclipses all the previous ones. I refer, naturally, to the splitting of the Reed Sea and the subsequent drowning of the Egyptians, recounted both in prose (Exodus 14) and in poetry (Exodus 15). Our treatment

... *grh pw n rhs wrw / hrw pw n rhs wrw*
(de Buck 1935–1961: 2.163; see also Faulkner 1973–1978: 1.117) (see Fig. 18.4)
...this night of the slaying of the first-born (*wrw*),
this day of the slaying of the first-born (*wrw*).

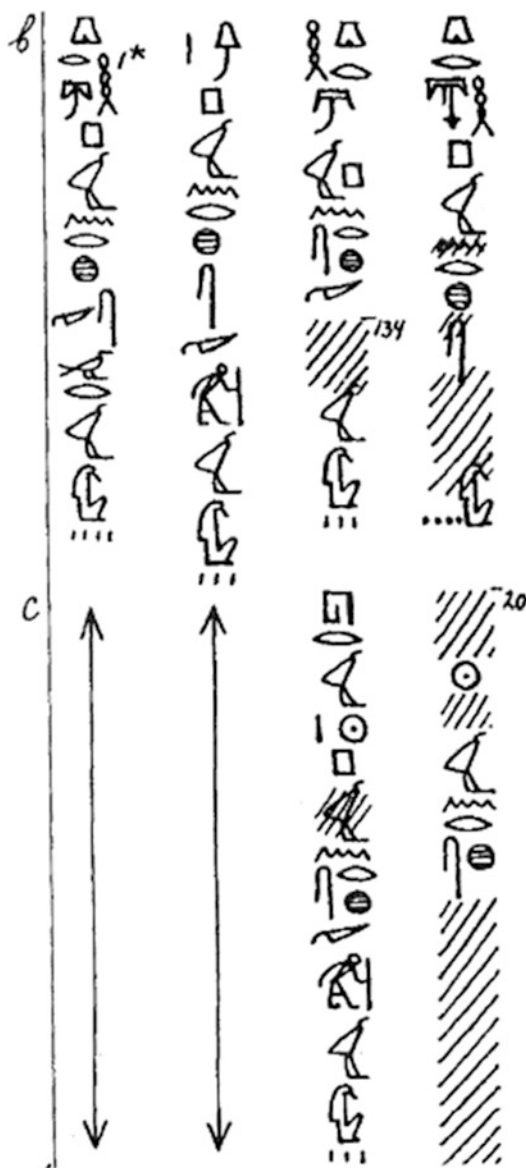


Fig. 18.4 Coffin Text §163b-c, from de Buck (1935–1961: 2.163). Used with kind permission of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

divides this episode into its two component parts, beginning with the splitting of the sea, for which there are two germane texts from ancient Egypt. We begin with the less famous and indeed slightly less comparable story, namely, an episode which appears in the Demotic tale “Setne Khamwas and Na-

nefer-ka-ptah,” known as “Setne I” for short, dated to the Ptolemaic period (Pap. Cairo 30646).²⁴ (For general orientation regarding the figure of Setne Khamwas, see above, §5) In the relevant snippet, the magician-prince Na-nefer-ka-ptah seeks to locate and obtain the “book” written by Thoth himself, now housed inside a box (actually, within a series of boxes) in the middle of the Nile at Coptos. Na-nefer-ka-ptah creates a model boat, replete with rowers and sailors, then brings it all to life via the recitation of a spell. At which point, the story reads:

He said to the rowers, “Row me to the place where that book is!” [They rowed him by night] as by day. In three days he reached it. He cast sand before him, and a gap formed in the river. He found six miles of serpents, scorpions, and all kinds of reptiles around [the place where the book was]. He found an eternal serpent around this same box. He recited a spell to the six miles of serpents, scorpions, and all kinds of reptiles that were around the box, and did not let them come up.²⁵ (page 3, lines 29–32)

The narrative continues with Na-nefer-ka-ptah’s opening of the series of nested boxes and his successful acquisition of the “book.” In short, we see in this tale the belief that an Egyptian wise man could part the waters (viz., “a gap formed in the river”) in order to reach the desired object, in this case, the “book” written by Thoth himself. The second pertinent text returns us to Papyrus Westcar (see above, §2), though this time our focus is on the third tale in the collection, “The Boating Party” story. In this tale, the royal family is enjoying a day of leisure on the lake, when a pendant of one of the princesses falls into the water. The king (Seneferu [4th Dynasty, c. 2600 B.C.E.]) commands that the chief lector-priest

²⁴ As with Setne II discussed above, the standard treatment remains, Griffith (1900), with translation and transliteration on pp. 82–141.

²⁵ Translation of Lichtheim (1980: 127–138) (esp. p. 130). For another translation, see Ritner in Simpson (2003: 454–469).

(*hry-tb hry-tp*) Djadja-em-ankh be brought, at which point we pick up the story as follows (col. 5, line 25, through col. 6, line 15):

Said his majesty, “Djadja-em-ankh, my brother, I did as you had said. My majesty’s heart was refreshed seeing them row. Then a pendant of new turquoise of one of the leaders fell into the water. She stopped rowing and thereby spoiled her side. I said to her, “Why have you stopped rowing?” She said to me, “Because the pendant of new turquoise fell into the water.” I said to her, “Row! I shall replace it for you!” She said to me, “I prefer my thing to one like it.”

Then the chief lector-priest Djadja-em-ankh said his say of magic. He placed one side of the lake’s water upon the other; and he found the pendant lying on a shard. He brought it and gave it to its owner. Now the water that had been twelve cubits deep across (lit. ‘on its back’) had become twenty-four cubits when it was turned back. Then he said his say of magic and returned the waters of the lake to their place.

His majesty spent the day feasting with the entire palace. Then he rewarded the chief lector-priest Djadja-em-ankh with all good things.²⁶

In other words, the marvel produced by Moses at the Sea of Reeds is of a piece with the marvel produced by the famous lector-priest Djadja-em-ankh in “The Boating Party” tale. Though whereas the dividing of the waters saves the day in the Egyptian tale, in the biblical narrative this action serves to outwit the Egyptians, allowing the Israelites to flee safely to the other side of the body of water. It is as if the biblical writer wishes to state the following (both here and in several instances above): if you Egyptians believe that magician-priests are capable of such praxes, we will use those very same actions to bring about your ruin and defeat. At the same time, for these tropes to be meaningful to an Israelite audience, who after all were the consumers of the biblical literature, one must assume a

considerable knowledge amongst the Israelites of ancient Egyptian beliefs and practices, perhaps even specific literary motifs.

- §8. The final item to be discussed here is the climactic act in the extended narrative of Exodus 1–15, to wit, the drowning of the Egyptians. We begin not with evidence from Egypt directly, but rather with the testimony of Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book Two, section 90:

When anyone, be he Egyptian or stranger, is known to have been carried off by a crocodile or drowned by the river itself, such an one must by all means be embalmed and tended as fairly as may be and buried in a sacred coffin by the townsmen of the place where he is cast up; nor may any of his kinsfolk or his friends touch him, but his body is deemed something more than human, and is handled and buried by the priests of the Nile themselves.²⁷

In short, according to Herodotus, death by drowning in ancient Egypt was a noble death.²⁸

Corroboration for this statement is forthcoming from native Egyptian sources, especially the two interrelated New Kingdom funerary texts, *Amduat*, 10th hour, and *Book of Gates*, 9th gate,²⁹ both of which portray the drowned ones afloat in the river in their respective registers. See below, line drawings in Figs. 18.5 and 18.6 and photo in Fig. 18.7, from KV-9, the tomb of Rameses VI.³⁰ A representative passage from the accompanying hieroglyphic text in the former runs as follows: “You are those who are within Nun, the drowned who are in his following. May life belong to your *bas*!”³¹ Another excellent exemplar of the *Book of Gates*, 9th gate, is visible in KV-14, the tomb shared by Tausert (pharaoh-queen,

²⁷ Translation of Godley (1921–1924: 1.375).

²⁸ For further discussion, see Griffith (1909), Rowe (1940: 3–30), and Lloyd (1976–1988: 1.366–367).

²⁹ For orientation, see Hornung (1999: 27–53, 55–77), respectively.

³⁰ All to be seen in the unsurpassed magisterial edition of Piankoff and Rambova (1954).

³¹ Translation of Manassa (2007: 350).

²⁶ Translation of Lichtheim (1973: 216–217) (esp. p. 217). For other renderings see Parkinson (1997: 109–112) (esp. p. 111), Simpson (2003: 16–18) (esp. pp. 17–18), and Quirke (2004: 81–83) (esp. pp. 82–83) (with transliteration). See also the German translation by Lepper (2008: 36–40) (esp. pp. 38–39) (with transliteration).

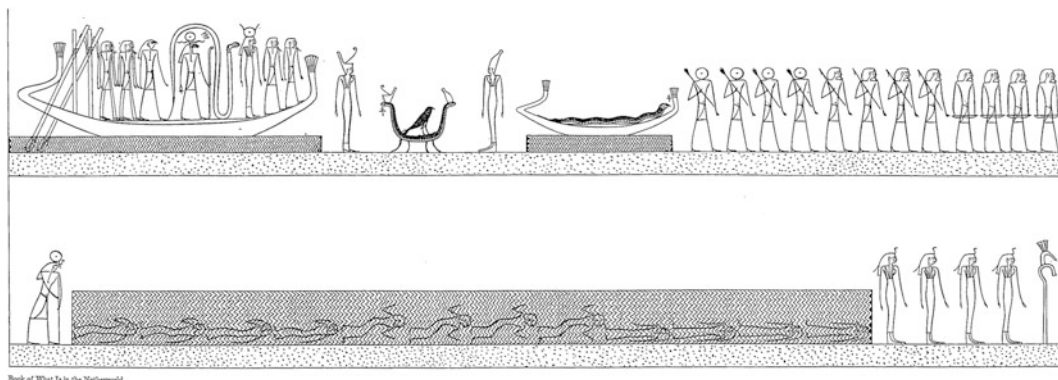


Fig. 18.5 KV-9, tomb of Rameses VI, Right Wall of Corridor G, Amduat 10th hour (Piankoff and Rambova 1954: fig. 85 [double foldout facing p. 299], with text on p. 304). Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

This image is also available online at <http://www.egiptologia.org/textos/amduat/10/>; see also Hornung (1999: 51), fig. 23

last monarch of Dynasty 19) and Setnakht (first pharaoh of Dynasty 20).³²

To relate this concept to a narrative already discussed herein, note that in Setne I (see above, §7), three different characters, including the great magician Na-nefer-kaptah himself, drown in the Nile and become “the praised one” of Ra—in Ritner’s words, “an expression for the deified ‘drowned’” (Ritner in Simpson 2003: 460, n. 19). Lichtheim (1973–1980: 3.131) goes so far to render the expression as simply “drowned,” though with a note “Lit., ‘He became one praised of Re’” (Lichtheim 1973–1980: 3.138, n. 12).

To return now to the biblical account of Exodus 14–15: it is as if the biblical author is stating: okay, Egyptians, if you believe that drowning is such an honorable death, then fine, we will arrange your demise in just such manner. Which is to say, the Torah’s narrative turns the death of honor into the death of dishonor.³³

Time and again we have seen how the Exodus narrative evokes Egyptian tropes and turns them on their head. The imagery of baseball may be helpful here, since in this sport the ground rules of the home team and its ballpark are in effect during the game. Since the Egyptians are the “home team” in the Exodus story, the biblical author plays by their rules, whereby inanimate objects may be transformed into crocodiles, the death of the first born is an important theme, waters can be divided in order to restore joy to the royal family, death by drowning is honorific, and more. The biblical author subverts all of these notions as he leads his readers through the sustained narrative. To repeat what I stated at the end of the previous section: in order for this technique to be meaningful, one must assume a considerable knowledge amongst the Israelites of ancient Egyptian beliefs and practices, perhaps even specific literary motifs.

§9. In the above sections, we have seen repeatedly that Moses (or at times Aaron) performs the same actions as those achieved by magicians, lector-priests, and the like in

³²For superb color images, go to: <http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/database/image.asp?ID=14638>, <http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/database/image.asp?ID=14641>, <http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/database/image.asp?ID=14642>, especially the middle one.

³³Given the centrality of the drowning motif in New Kingdom texts of the afterlife, I would argue that the presence of this trope in Exodus 14–15 is essential to the

biblical tradition, and does not constitute a later development. For discussion, see Loewenstamm (1972: 101–120) (with English summary on pp. viii–ix).

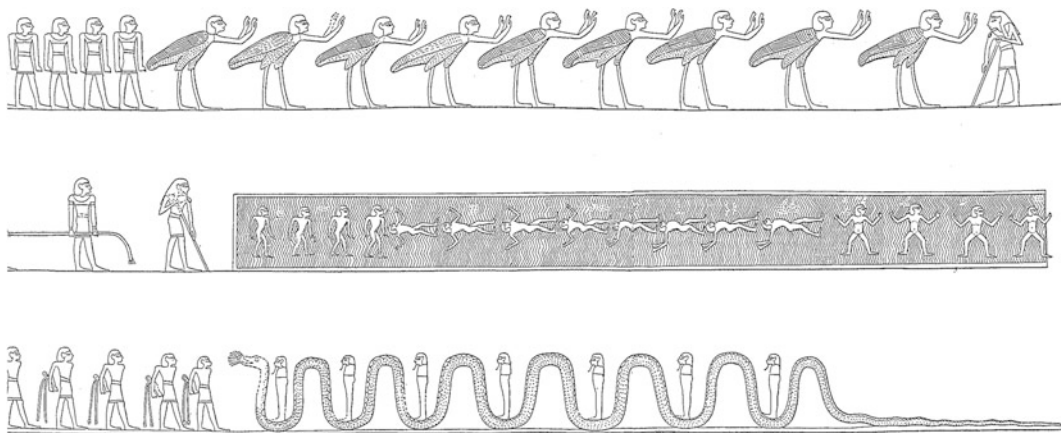


Fig. 18.6 KV-9, tomb of Rameses VI, Left Wall of Corridor, Book of Gates, 9th Gate, (Piankoff and Rambova 1954: fig. 54 [double foldout facing p. 190], with text on pp. 193–194). Reprinted by permission of Princeton University

Press. This image is also available online at <http://www.egiptologia.org/textos/puertas/08/>; see also Hornung (1999: 74), fig. 38

ancient Egyptian texts. In the biblical presentation of the narrative, however, one detects an important distinction. When the Egyptian magicians execute their magic, they do so via the recitation of magical spells, as indicated in the following verses:

Exodus 7:11

וַיִּקְרָא גַם־פִּרְעֹה לַחֲכָמִים וְלַמְכַשְׁפִּים וַיַּעֲשׂוּ גַם־הֵם חֲרָטְמֵי
מִצְרַיִם בַּלְטִיָּהִם כֹּן׃

And Pharaoh called the wise-men and the sorcerers, and they also did, the magician-priests of Egypt, by their spells likewise.

Exodus 7:22 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן הַחֲרָטְמִים מִצְרַיִם בַּלְטִיָּהֶם

And the magician-priests of Egypt did likewise by their spells.

Exodus 8:3 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן הַחֲרָטְמִים בַּלְטִיָּהֶם

And the magician-priests did likewise by their spells.

Exodus 8:14 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן הַחֲרָטְמִים בַּלְטִיָּהֶם

And the magician-priests did likewise by their spells.

This presentation of the Egyptian *hartumim* accords with the narratives we have examined herein, in which Webaoner “read out his magic words,” Djadja-em-ankh “said his say of magic,” Na-nefer-ka-ptah “recited a spell,” and so on (quoting the translations utilized above). Magical praxes in ancient Egypt were almost always accomplished

through the recitation of magical spells (Ritner 1993: 35–49; see Noegel 1996: *passim*)—a point clearly recognized by the biblical author. By contrast, when Moses (and/or Aaron) engage in such acts, the biblical text is mindful never to ascribe the results to the magical arts. The leaders of the Israelites are able to accomplish such tasks because God empowered them to do so, pure and simple. In the words of Nahum Sarna (1986: 59), “Moses knows no techniques, recites no spells, utters no incantations or magical formulae.”³⁴ Let us recall here the famous passage in Num 23:23, uttered by Balaam (mentioned above [§1] in passing): “for there is no magic in Jacob, and no sorcery in Israel”—a point which holds throughout the Bible, including, as we have seen, the book of Exodus. In short, while the ends are the same, the means are profoundly different.

One additional point is worthy of mention here, as it once more speaks to the manner in which the Exodus narrative is thoroughly anchored in its Egyptian milieu. I refer here to the manner in which these actions

³⁴ See also Sarna (1991: 37).



Fig. 18.7 KV-9, tomb of Rameses VI, Left Wall of Corridor, Book of Gates, 9th Gate; note the drowned ones in the upper register; photo © Gary A. Rendsburg

(whether induced by magic or via divine empowerment) are considered perfectly natural and acceptable—one might even say, expected—within the general story line. Which is to say, of course these things can happen. As Ritner (1993: 8–9) observed, “No suggestion of trickery is ever implied in Egyptian terms for magic. Even where theatrical feats are described in literature, there is no indication that writer or audience disbelieved the *possibility* of such feats.”³⁵ The biblical text enters the mindset of ancient Egypt so thoroughly that this is equally true of the book of Exodus—on both sides, whether the *hartumim*

or whether Moses and Aaron are the initiators of these feats.

§10. Finally, we turn to the issue of the wide chronological range of the Egyptian parallels evoked in this article. As we have seen, the texts derive from the full range of Egyptian chronological periods: Old Kingdom (Pyramid Texts), First or Second Intermediate Period (Ipuwer), Middle Kingdom (Pap. Westcar, Neferti, Coffin Texts), New Kingdom (Pap. Turin 1993, Amduat, Book of Gates), Persian period (Herodotus), Ptolemaic rule (Setne I), and Roman period (Setne II). The warnings of parallelomania are clearly in mind here.

There are several controls, though. First we should keep in mind the tenacity of Egyptian religion and tradition, with beliefs and customs present already during the Old Kingdom still reverberating in the late period. One need only peruse Alan Lloyd’s (1976) commentary on Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book Two, to realize the number

³⁵To which Ritner added a footnote, “Compare the miraculous events narrated in Pap. Westcar, Setna I, and Setna II” (p. 9, n. 24), all of which have been discussed above. Ritner further commented that this Egyptian attitude to magic stands in contrast to the Greco-Roman world, in which magic was judged with skepticism and distrust (p. 9).

of points raised by the fifth-century Greek historian with antecedents stretching back one or two millennia. To provide just one illustration from a passage cited earlier, note that the depilation practiced by the Egyptian priests (see above, §4) is depicted throughout the earlier epochs as well, even if it did not become standard until the 19th Dynasty apparently (te Velde 1995: 1733; Green 2001: 73; Filer 2001: 135). Or to use an example not forthcoming from Herodotus, note that the motif of darkness occurs both in the “Prophecy of Neferti,” composed during the Middle Kingdom, with textual witnesses from the New Kingdom, and in “Setne Khamwas and Si-Osire” (=Setne II), dated to the first century C.E.—a span of approximately two millennia.

Accordingly, regardless of how we envision the production of the book of Exodus (multiple sources, single unified text, etc.), and no matter to when we date these sources and/or the final product,³⁶ to my mind, and as I hope to have demonstrated by now, an educated Israelite writer and his well-informed Israelite audience would have been familiar with the Egyptian cultural context which motivated a good portion of the dramatic narrative of Exodus 1–15.

The second control is that almost without exception the parallels to the Exodus narrative are known only from Egypt, and not from other sources, such as Canaan (especially Ugarit) and Mesopotamia. Motifs such as the hidden name of the deity, turning an inanimate object into a snake or a crocodile, the casting of darkness, the death of the firstborn, the splitting of the waters, and the drowning theme find a home in Egyptian culture only, without an echo (to the best of my knowledge) in other ancient

Near Eastern societies. The one exception is the first plague, turning the water into blood, which occurs in two Sumerian compositions, both involving Inanna, “Exaltation of Inanna” and “Inanna and the Gardener” (for references, see Propp 1998: 349). This concession, however, should not serve to overturn the larger picture presented here.

In sum, the narrative that encompasses Exodus 1–15 evokes the Egyptian setting at every turn. I, for one, like to imagine an ancient Israelite audience enjoying the recitation, with complete understanding of the nature of the composition, which both subverts Egyptian religious notions and simultaneously expresses Israel’s national heritage in exquisite literary fashion.

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³⁶ As intimated above on several occasions, I prefer a holistic approach to the narrative. As to its date, while a full treatment is not possible here, I would place the composition at the time of the early monarchy. For general background, albeit with a focus on the book of Genesis, see Rendsburg (2005).

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