

Abraham and Jacob that he would bring them back to the land he had promised them (Gen 15:13–16; 46:4).

The deliverance from Egypt would resolve that issue—and that wasn't the only question God's providential acts would address. The Israelites asked "Where is Yahweh?" in the wake of God's decision to send them into hostile territory. But Pharaoh and his people—and all the nations—asked a different question: "Who is Yahweh?" (Exod 5:2). They would find out the hard way.

The reason for Israel's circumstances was that it wasn't sufficient that only Israel knew Yahweh was Most High among all gods, and that Israel was his portion. The other nations had to know that as well. Scripture makes it clear that Israel's deliverance had that effect. Israel was in Egypt precisely so that Yahweh could deliver them—thereby conveying this theological message.

YAHWEH AND THE GODS OF EGYPT

Gentiles back in Canaan heard about what Yahweh had done (Josh 2:8–10; cf. Exod 15:16–18; Josh 9:9). In Midian, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, put the impact in no uncertain terms: "Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all the gods, even in the matter where they the Egyptians dealt arrogantly against the Israelites" (Exod 18:11). Yahweh's reputation among the nations was linked to Israel's exodus and transplantation in the land (Num 14:15–16; Deut 9:28; Josh 7:9; 2 Sam 7:23).

This backdrop is why the exodus event is repeatedly cast as a conflict between Yahweh and the gods. Pharaoh, as we know, was unresponsive to the command of God through Moses to let his people go. In Exodus 5:2, Pharaoh had sarcastically asked Moses, "Who is Yahweh that I should listen to his voice to release Israel?" His answer came in a series of horrible plagues.

The Bible tells us the plagues were aimed at Egypt's gods (Exod 12:12; Num 33:4), the *elohim* who had been given their authority by Yahweh and who were supposed to govern Egypt on his behalf. The idea is not that each plague neatly corresponds to an Egyptian deity, only that the powerful acts of Yahweh went beyond the power of the gods of Egypt and their divine representative-son, Pharaoh.¹

1. See the discussion of the plagues and their theological messaging in James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 149–53. Hoffmeier introduces the notion that the plagues targeted Pharaoh's role as the representative god of the Egyptian state (p. 151), an approach he developed elsewhere: "Egypt, Plagues In," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 374–76. On the divinity of Pharaoh, see David P. Silverman, "Kingship and Divinity," in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice* (ed. Byron Esely Shafer, Leonard H. Lesko, and David P. Silverman; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 58–87.

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Egyptian theology linked Pharaoh and Egypt's pantheon. From the fourth dynasty onward in Egypt, Pharaoh was considered the son of the high God Re. He was, to borrow the biblical expression, Re's image on earth, the maintainer of the cosmic order established by Re and his pantheon at the creation.

Pharaoh was the son of Re. Israel was explicitly called the son of Yahweh in the confrontation with Pharaoh (Exod 4:23; cf. Hos 11:1). Yahweh and his son would defeat the high god of Egypt and his son. God against god, son against son, imager against imager. In that context, the plagues are spiritual warfare. Yahweh will undo the cosmic order, throwing the land into chaos.²

The final plague in particular, the death of the firstborn, was aimed at Egypt's gods. God told Moses, "And I will go through the land of Egypt during this night, and I will strike all of the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and I will do punishments among all of the gods of Egypt. I am Yahweh" (Exod 12:12).

The spiritual conflict is brought into vivid and tragic focus in this last plague. Yahweh would act directly, in the form of his angel, against the gods and people of Egypt. We read in Exodus 12:23 (ESV), "For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer [*mashkhit*] to enter your houses to strike you."

There is no explicit reference to the Angel here. However, the word translated "destroyer" (*mashkhit*) gives us a clue as to who the destroyer was. The term *mashkhit* is employed in only three passages to describe divine judgment: here in Exodus 12:23; 2 Samuel 24:16; and 1 Chronicles 21:15. These last two instances describe the same event—the judgment for David's sin carried out by the Angel of Yahweh. 2 Samuel 24:16–17a reads:

¹⁶When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, Yahweh regretted about the evil, and he said to the angel who brought destruction [*mashkhit*] among the people, "Enough, now relax your hand." Now the angel of Yahweh was at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. ¹⁷David spoke to Yahweh when he saw the angel destroying among the people.

An identification of the destroyer with the Angel of the LORD is also perhaps suggested by Zechariah 12:8–10. In the context of the eschatological Day of the LORD we read:

2. See Thomas Dozeman, "The Song of the Sea and Salvation History," in *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George M. Landes*, American Schools of Oriental Research 4 (ed. S. L. Cook and S. C. Winter; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 94–113; and L. Michael Morales, *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured: Cosmic Mountain Ideology in Genesis and Exodus*, Biblical Tools and Studies 15 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 196–205, for the cosmic implications of the exodus event.

⁸On that day Yahweh will put a shield around the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the one who stumbles among them on that day will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the angel of Yahweh, before them. ⁹And then on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations coming against Jerusalem.

¹⁰I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication, and they will look to me whom they pierced, and they shall mourn over him, as one wails over an only child, and they will grieve bitterly over him as one grieves bitterly over a firstborn (Zech 12:8–10).

The passage clearly identifies the angel with Yahweh, who seeks to destroy all the nations coming against Jerusalem and his people. The reference to those who suffer as grieving over a firstborn is a striking allusion back to the last plague against Egypt and the death angel.

That the destroyer is Yahweh's special angel should be no surprise. We've already looked ahead at his appearance to Joshua as commander of Yahweh's host. Yahweh comes in human form to be among his people and to fight for them, judging those who sought his people's enslavement and death (Exod 1–2; 13–14). The visible Yahweh would later do the same to other enemies, like the Assyrians (Isa 37:36).

WHO IS LIKE YAHWEH AMONG THE GODS?

On the other side of the Red Sea crossing, this earthly judgment of Egypt is clearly viewed as a victorious outcome of a cosmic conflict in the unseen world. As we've seen so often before, behind a familiar story much is missed without a grasp of the ancient cosmic worldview.

Having crossed the watery chasm³ on dry land, Moses and the people of Israel sang the praises of the unmatched Yahweh. This song is recorded for us in Exodus 15. Moses asks, "Who is like Yahweh, among the gods [*elim*]?" The answer to the rhetorical question is obvious. Yahweh is incomparable. No

3. The Israelites crossed through the waters of the "Red Sea" (Exod 15:4). The biblical phrase is *yam suph*, translated by most scholars as "sea of reeds" (the word "red" in Hebrew is *edom*, which does not occur with *yam*, "sea"). The phrasing and its translation has led to voluminous debate over the location of the crossing. To make matters more confusing, Num 33:8 says the Israelites "went through the midst of the sea into the desert" and has the Israelites at the "Red Sea" (*yam suph*) days later (Num 33:10–11). Scholars have offered a number of ways to reconcile the accounts, though all of them depend at some point on speculation. For our purposes, the proposal that *yam suph* describes both a real location and the primeval waters of chaos is most interesting, particularly in light of the ensuing discussion of Psalms 74. See the companion website for my interaction with the following two articles: N. H. Snaith, "ים סוף: The Sea of Reeds; The Red Sea," *Vetus Testamentum* 15.3 (July 1965): 395–98 (note that the Hebrew pointing in the article title is that of Snaith); Bernard F. Batto, "The Reed Sea: *Requiescat in Pace*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102.1 (1983): 27–35.

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other god is like him. As I noted earlier, if the other gods were considered fairy tales by Israelites, this statement is at best a joke and at worst a lie.

Why is it, then, that Psalm 74:12–17 describes the crossing as involving the defeat of a sea monster?

¹²But God has been my king from long ago,
working salvation in the midst of the earth.

¹³You split open the sea [*yam*] by your strength;
You broke the heads of the sea monsters [*tanninim*] in the waters.

¹⁴You crushed the heads of Leviathan [*liwyatan*];
you gave him as food to the desert dwelling creatures.

¹⁵You split open spring and wadi.
You dried up ever-flowing rivers.

¹⁶Yours is the day, yours is the night also.
You established light and the sun.

¹⁷You defined all the boundaries of the earth;
Summer and winter—you formed them.

Did you catch the language? God “split open the sea” and crushed the heads of “sea monsters” (*tanninim*) and Leviathan (*liwyatan*), giving the beasts as food for “desert dwelling creatures.” God split open the “spring and wadi,” two terms frequently associated with desert water sources, and dried up “rivers.” What happened to the *sea*?

To make things even more confusing, the psalm has a number of allusions to Genesis 1. In the original creation chapter, God also “divided the waters” (Gen 1:6–7). Virtually all of the language in verses Psalm 74:16–17 can be found in Genesis 1 (Gen 1:4–5, 9–10, 14–18).

Confusing? An ancient Israelite would have no trouble deciphering the messaging in Psalm 74 and recognizing that it ties the exodus crossing to creation—and then links both events to slaying a sea monster known as Leviathan.⁴

The symbolic imagery of Leviathan and the “sea” (*yam*) is well known from the ancient literature of Ugarit, a city-state in ancient Syria.⁵ Of the stories that have survived from Ugarit, one of the most famous describes how Baal became king of the gods. This story is the backdrop for Psalm 74.

The epic tale describes how Baal battles against *Yamm*, a deity symbolized as a chaotic, violent force, often depicted as a dragon-like sea monster. In the

4. I've omitted a discussion of the forces of chaos—the point of the well-known Leviathan symbol in antiquity—and biblical creation accounts. See the companion website.

5. I mentioned and described Ugarit in chapter 6.

guise of this sea beast, *Yamm* was also referred to by the names *Tannun* or *Litanu*. The overlap with the biblical terminology is transparent. Baal defeated the raging sea and the sea monster, earning “everlasting dominion” over the gods. The moral of the Ugaritic story is that the high king of the gods (Baal) has power over the unpredictable forces of nature.⁶

Genesis 1 and 2 don’t provide the Bible’s only creation story. Psalm 74 describes creation as well—as Yahweh’s victory over the forces of primeval chaos. Yahweh brought the world into order, making it habitable for humanity, his people as it were. The creation act as described in Psalm 74 was theologically crucial for establishing Yahweh’s superiority over all other gods. Baal was not king of the gods, as the Ugaritic story proclaimed—Yahweh was.

Neither was Pharaoh, or any other Egyptian deity. By linking the exodus event—the taming of the chaotic waters so that Yahweh’s people could pass through them untouched—with the creation story, the biblical writers were telegraphing a simple, potent message. Yahweh is king of all gods. He is lord of creation—not Pharaoh, who, in Egyptian theology, was responsible for maintaining creation order. The same God who created also maintains that creation, and calls it into his service when needed.⁷

It’s no wonder that Exodus 15:11 has Moses, on the other side of the waters, ask: *Who is like you among the gods, Yahweh?*

No one in the ancient world, Israelite or otherwise, would have missed the theological punch. These passages left no question as to who was king of the unseen realm, and whose side that king was on. As creator, Yahweh had made the world habitable for all humanity. But the nations had been forsaken. Now the same God once again was described as subduing the forces of chaos to deliver his portion, Israel, for whom he had prepared a place of habitation—the promised land.

But before getting to the land, Yahweh needed to teach his people a few things. It’s time for some theology lessons at a place called Mount Sinai, Yahweh’s new earthly abode, headquarters of his unseen council.

6. Other passages in the Old Testament refer to Leviathan using descriptions found in Ugaritic tablets. In some Ugaritic stories *Litanu* is described as a “twisting serpent” and “fleeing serpent.” Those exact phrases are used of Leviathan in Isa 27:1 and Job 26:13.

7. Yahweh frequently appears in a whirlwind with fire, lightning, and tempest, thereby identifying himself as the source and controller of all these forces (Job 22:14; 38:1; Pss 97:2; 104:3; Nah 1:3). He is Lord of the hosts of heaven, king of all gods (Deut 10:17; 2 Chr 2:5; Pss 86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 136:2).

THE EXODUS catalyst for the victory or guidance of the people. Over the centuries, we hark back to

God’s Edom. His image. Yahweh told us of his authority in that God placed his imagers. The Heaven had the earthly people to live and rule

Genesis 3: the hands of the foolish and the human hand would not triumph over the nations with their rebellion. That in the end, through his faith

God delivered them. They were defeated by the flood and the chaos.