

EXODUS AS THE SUBVERSION OF EGYPTIAN IMPERIAL MYTHOLOGY

Neill Elliott¹

Abstract

On the basis of the features of the Exodus narrative, I suggest that we are dealing in parts of Exodus with a subversive parody of Egyptian mythology. It is not that the Egyptian gods are (so to speak) brought recognizably on stage, but that some of their characteristic actions—significantly, actions of fundamental symbolic importance for the stability of the Egyptian dynasty—are mimed by other characters: not only by Israel's god, the LORD, but by the anti-characters—ostensibly polar opposites to the glorious, powerful figures of Egyptian myth—through whom the LORD's purposes are accomplished. One powerful and, I suggest, an intended effect of the Exodus account operates at the level of mythology, specifically, the myths involved in the distinctly Egyptian ideology of kingship. We are not dealing in Exodus with an “ancient” or “primitive” attempt to explain, in mythic terms, otherwise bewildering natural events (earthquakes, atmospheric effects, naturally occurring environmental imbalances, etc.). To the extent something else is going on, modern attempts to develop scientific explanations for reconstructing “what really happened” as natural phenomena rather miss the point.

In what follows I draw attention to some aspects of Egyptian mythology concerning the goddess Isis, her consort Osiris, and their son Horus that bear comparison with aspects of the Exodus story. At the outset I should stipulate what the informed reader will readily enough gather: that I am not an Egyptologist and that my familiarity with the field is that of an amateur. I discuss themes and images that I have found discussed in varied sources, some of the older of which contemporary Egyptologists urge should be used only with considerable caution.² I ask the generous

¹ Dr. Neill Elliott is the acquisition editor in biblical studies at Fortress Press. He also serves as an Episcopal priest and scholar-in-residence at St. Paul Episcopal Church in the Hill in St. Paul.

² For example, E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians: Studies in Egyptian*

reader to consider whether the arguments here might be made stronger by reliance on even better evidence than I have been able to muster. I welcome any corrections or qualifications that might be offered.³

I. A Relatively Unexplored Question

To my knowledge, the two sets of episodes—the Isis–Osiris–Horus myth and the Exodus narrative—have only very rarely been compared, and then only incidentally, not systematically. That is understandable. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, a wealth of archaeological discoveries in Syria–Palestine, not least the spectacular discovery of Ugarit and the rich find of literary materials at Ras Shamra, have focused scholarly attention on the Canaanite environment in which Israel emerged, on the problems of identifying a recognizably “Israelite” material culture against that environment, and on continuity and contrast between Canaanite myth and Hebrew epic or Israelite religion.⁴ The study of Canaanite culture “has developed into a quasi-independent specialization” within biblical studies,⁵ and the contest among alternative accounts of Israel’s emergence in Canaan (whether as “conquest,” pastoral migration, or cultural revolution within the Canaanite city-states) continues to this day.⁶

Mythology, 2 vols. (Chicago: Open Court; London: Methuen, 1904; reprint New York: Dover, 1969); idem, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection* (2 vols.; London: Warner, 1911; reprint in one volume, New York: University Books, 1961). Budge’s considerable knowledge accompanies a marked condescension toward “the Egyptian mind.” He cites as his source for drawings Ridolfo Vittorio Lanzone, *Dizionario di Mitologia Egizia* (2 vols.; Turin: Litografia Fratelli Doyen, 1881), which I have not had leisure to consult.

³³ I am grateful for the helpful comments and criticisms I received from members of the Egyptology and Ancient Israel Group at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Atlanta in November 2011 and especially to the gracious guidance of Professor John Gee; errors that remain in what follows are my own responsibility.

⁴ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Patrick Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

⁵ J. J. M. Roberts, “Ancient Near Eastern Environment,” *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Douglas Knight and Gene Tucker (Philadelphia and Chico: Fortress and Scholars, 1985), p. 77.

⁶ See for example Baruch Halpern, *The Emergence of Israel in Canaan*, SBLMS 29 (Chico: Scholars, 1983); for the last hypothesis see George Mendenhall, “The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine,” *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, vol. 3 (Garden City:

Archaeological and inscriptional evidence from Egypt has also been scrutinized for specific aspects of Israel's "environment": for example, for possible clues to the ethnic or social background of the liberated Hebrew slaves of the Exodus story, or in James Hoffmeier's phrase, for evidence of "Israel in Egypt"⁷ or (more often, transposing the question to a much larger scale) for broad patterns of social and cultural change across the fertile crescent in the Bronze Age.⁸ In general, however, biblical scholars have devoted less attention to comparing Israelite epic with Egyptian than with Canaanite mythology.

Another important factor is the widely accepted (but also much debated) documentary hypothesis, which traces stages of the composition of the Torah in the early Israelite monarchy, the divided kingdoms, Babylonian exile, and Persian colonial rule in Yehud—but attributes very little of the corpus (if any) to an Egyptian setting. Even what are widely considered very early fragmentary materials are routinely compared with Canaanite exemplars: Miriam's hymn to the warrior god YHWH (Exod 15:20-21) resembles Canaanite poetry; the archaic recital of the Exodus in Deut 26:5-10 is placed in the covenant renewal liturgies of the pre-monarchic Israelite federation, where it functioned to sharply distinguish an Israelite from a Canaanite; and so forth.⁹ Ancient Egypt is simply not where Hebrew Bible scholars usually look to explain what we find in Torah.

Doubleday, 1970), 100-120; idem, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context*, ed. Gary Herion (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001); Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

⁷ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁸ Attention to Egyptian evidence has focused, for example, on the reference to Israel in the Merneptah stele, or on possible connections between the "sea peoples" or the enigmatic *hapiru* mentioned in Egyptian (and other ancient near eastern) texts and the Exodus narrative.

⁹ W. Lee Humphreys, *Crisis and Story: Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View: Mayfield, 1990), p. 39. James K. Hoffmeier considers the Documentary Hypothesis an important factor in the "erosion" and "collapse" of the Wright-Albright "biblical archaeology" approach (*Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], chap. 1). I observe this context but do not intend in this paper to take a stand in the larger questions of history and historiography.

In what follows I offer an exploration of possible *Egyptian* mythological parallels to aspects of the Exodus epic. I focus on mythic elements involving Osiris, Isis, and Horus that have an evident connection with the Egyptian ideology of kingship.

II. The Osiris-Isis-Horus Myth and the Ideology of Egyptian Kingship

I speak of mythic elements regarding Osiris, Isis, and Horus because these elements are not found in a connected narrative before Plutarch's essay *On Isis and Osiris* in the second century C.E. That essay, addressed to a priestess of Isis in the Roman era, engages in allegorical and "euhemeristic" interpretation and fanciful etymologies of names and terms that show us that we cannot take Plutarch as a reliable guide to the coherence or meaning of far older Egyptian materials. Some of the episodes to which Plutarch refers are nevertheless mentioned in ancient third-millennium sources such as the Pyramid Texts (2500–2300 B.C.E.) and Coffin Texts (2300–2000 B.C.E.) and the so-called Memphite Theology.¹⁰ Because the earlier texts and images are predominantly concerned with the destiny and post-mortem welfare of the Pharaohs, and because later texts reveal a process—clearly complete by the Roman period—in which Osiris and Isis came to be understood as gods concerned with the afterlife of faithful individuals, it is easy to relegate this mythic cycle to the study of Egyptian afterlife conceptions.¹¹

When we first encounter the "full-blown" Osiris-Isis-Horus myths

¹⁰ As Rundle Clarke observes, there is "no canonical version of the legends" about Osiris, "in fact there is no legend at all in the modern sense"; we are left dealing in the earliest texts only with a wealth of "allusions to lost myths" (*Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* [London: Thames and Hudson, 1959], 107). Similarly Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), p. 126; Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 34.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade describes the process, already in Egyptian religion, whereby afterlife conceptions originally centered on the pharaoh came to be "democratized" among an elite and ultimately among the general population: *A History of Religious Ideas, vol. 1: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 100-103; 109-113.

in the late Old Kingdom, however, they were clearly bound up with the ideology of kingship in Egypt.¹² The pharaoh was the son of god, indeed god present on earth; but this meant more than simply that the Pharaoh's authority was absolute, that he ruled "by divine right." Henri Frankfort remarks on the general emphasis in Egyptian culture upon *permanence* and regularity. The rhythms of the seasons, of the Nile's flooding, and the consequent fertility of the fields, were constant themes. No less was the dynasty of the pharaohs regarded as permanently established from creation. The potentially disruptive transition occasioned by the death of a pharaoh was the focus of tremendous symbolic attention in the Osiris-Isis-Horus myth:

The death of a king was, in a manner characteristic of the Egyptians, glossed over in so far as it meant a change. The succession from one king to another was viewed as an unchanging mythological situation: Horus succeeded Osiris, just as human kings were succeeded by their sons.¹³

The myth held particular power because in it "the father, Osiris, disappeared definitively from the earthly scene." He nevertheless went on to reign as lord of the underworld, the realm of the dead, and his son Horus acceded to the throne. Thus,

the new king assumed rule as Horus; his father had coalesced at death with Osiris, the forebear and prototype of all dead kings. The [now deceased] king, who in life had mediated between his people and the powers in nature, merged with these powers at his death; his vitality broke forth from the earth in which he rested. As Osiris he was alive in the growing grain, in the rising waters of the Nile,

¹² "The premises of Pharaoh's great personal power lie in the religious implications of Egyptian kingship" (Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, p. 42. See also Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948), especially chap. 15; Edmund S. Meltzer, "Horus," *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 164-68; J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Isis," in *ibid.*, 169-72; and *idem*, "Osiris," in *ibid.*, 302-307; Rundle, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, 107ff.

¹³ Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 105.

in the rising moon.¹⁴

This general analysis should, of course, be given more specificity than is possible here. It should suffice, however, to show that Osiris' departure to the chthonic realm and Horus' succession to the throne are transparently related "to the passing of kingship in Egypt."¹⁵ The myth complex is much more than a succession narrative. The ideology of the dynasty is sustained by the poignancy and pathos of Isis' fierce loyalty to her husband and solicitous care for her son and of Horus's resolute purpose in avenging all wrongs against the enemy of his murdered father (and, indeed, of all Egypt).¹⁶

Despite the episodic character of our sources, it is possible to organize a mythic sequence involving the triad Osiris, Isis, and Horus.¹⁷ To some extent, this sequence can be established by putting individual events into an apparently logical narrative sequence, without recourse to subsequent extended narratives such as Plutarch's, though we might well question whether a coherent narrative necessarily preceded the ceremonial affirmations of individual actions or events in the Pyramid Texts.

1. Osiris, a powerful and just king, was ambushed by his jealous brother, Seth, who sealed him into a coffin and had the coffin thrown into the Nile.¹⁸

¹⁴Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁵David P. Silverman, "Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt," *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (New York: Cornell University, 1991), p. 44.

¹⁶Jan Assmann discusses the evolution of Seth, Osiris's mythic enemy, as the representation in different periods of hostile forces outside Egypt (*Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008], chap. 2).

¹⁷Eliade provides a helpful outline of the "central myth" as reconstructed from the Egyptian Pyramid Texts: *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, pp. 97-8. See also Rundle, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, chapter 3: "Osiris—Original Scheme."

¹⁸Compare Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 13. Griffiths observes that the Pyramid Texts never specify in this episode that Osiris was *killed* by Seth; only that he was "struck down" by him and, in another place, narrowly saved from drowning by Isis and Nephtys ("Osiris"). Rundle argues that the murder by Seth is nonetheless "assumed" by the Egyptian texts (Rundle, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, 106).

2. (Osiris's sister) Isis and Nephtys searched for the coffin.¹⁹ It had washed up on shore and been incorporated into a great tamarisk tree that had grown up around it.²⁰
3. Here Plutarch adds a narrative episode (*On Isis and Osiris* 15) not clearly attested in earlier Egyptian sources. Isis learned that the coffin had come to rest in Byblos and that the king of Byblos had made the tree that now contained it into a pillar of his palace. Isis made her way to the city, "sat down by a spring, all dejection and tears," and spoke to no one except "the queen's maidservants." These she befriended, "plaiting their hair . . . and imparting to their persons a wondrous fragrance from her own body." The queen came herself to long for "the unknown woman," that is, Isis, and called her into the palace and made her the nurse of her own baby (that is, the prince of Byblos). Having thus ingratiated herself with the royal house, Isis asked for the pillar, easily extricated her husband's coffin from it, and set sail with it in her barge (16-17). She took with her the queen's son, her nursling, but when she opened the coffin and exposed the mummy of Osiris the child died of fright.
4. Interestingly, there are allusions in a somewhat older Egyptian text of which Plutarch's narrative might be regarded as providing echoes or possible parallels. The Metternich Stele (Ptolemaic period, fourth century B.C.E.) bears the inscription of a text, which Budge named "The Sorrows of Isis," in which Isis describes her

¹⁹ This part of the myth gives the cycle its particular pathos, as Rundle observes, and bears comparison with the wandering and lamentation of Ishtar in search of the vanquished Tammuz (*Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, 105) and Demeter's disconsolate search for her daughter Kore/Persephone (observed by F. C. Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia*, vol. V [LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962], 41 note a); on the pathos of Isis see also Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 2:211-12, and R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), chap. 1.

²⁰ Plutarch states that the coffin washed up in Byblos and that after it the tree had grown up around it, the king of Byblos had the tree removed and incorporated as a pillar of his palace (*Isis and Osiris* 15). Budge suggested that Plutarch had mistaken the Greek rendering of the Papyrus Swamps (*byblos*) for the Phoenician city (*The Gods of the Egyptians*, 2:124).

travels in the Papyrus Swamps, seeking the body of her husband. She declares that she approached “the houses of the women of the governor” but “the chief woman . . . closed her doors upon me.” Isis is then taken in by “a poor woman.” A scorpion enters the house of the noble woman and stings her son: Isis, not wishing the innocent boy to die, uses her powers to heal him.²¹ While this narrative is very different in detail from Plutarch’s account, both put Isis in the situation of having to rely upon “the kindness of strangers” among a city’s leading houses and describe harm coming to the eldest son of the royal household. Again, however, we cannot determine that such a sequence was part of a mythic narrative in a much earlier period (that of either the Pyramid or Coffin Texts).

5. Plutarch also specifies that Isis’ return with the body of Osiris was impeded by “a rather boisterous wind” and that “the goddess grew angry and dried up its stream” to make her passage (*On Isis and Osiris* 17). I am not aware of any earlier parallels to this specific event but note the language in a text from the tomb of Seti I in which the deceased Pharaoh is enabled to pass through the hours of the night on the bark of Osiris and thus to reach the dawn and new life. The latter text reads, in part, “The great god passes over the hidden way of Amentet in his boat, which is endowed with magical powers, and he journeys over it when there is no stream in it, and when there are none to tow him. He performs this by means of the words of power of Isis and of Ser, and by means of the mighty words of power which proceed from his own mouth . . .”²²
6. In a subsequent episode, Seth, enraged, again took possession of the body and dismembered it, dispersing the parts to different locations along the Nile (which later become cult centers).
7. Isis set about recovering these parts of the body and assembling them into a mummy. (Her action, with her sister Nephtys, plays an

²¹ Text in Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 2:222-40, esp. 222-24; 229.

²² Text in Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 1:230. Budge calls the larger document the “Book of the Underworld.”

important role in the ritual spells of the Pyramid Texts, where the deceased Pharaoh is identified with Osiris and incorporated with his coming to life again.)

8. What happened next is usually described in euphemism. As E. A. Wallis Budge decorously translated a Hymn to Osiris, Isis “stirred up from his state of inactivity him whose heart was still [i.e., Osiris], she drew from him his seed, she made an heir”—that is, she revived Osiris sufficiently to conceive Horus, with whom the new Pharaoh, son of the deceased Pharaoh, is ritually identified.²³ Iconography depicts Isis as a hawk hovering over the not-quite-inert body of Osiris.

9. Isis then must conceal and protect the son who will grow up to avenge his murdered father. The Hymn to Osiris continues: Isis “suckled the babe in solitariness, and the place wherein she reared him is unknown.” It is only because of this period of concealment and protection from his father’s enemy, Seth, that Horus would be able later to accede to his father’s throne and the company of the gods.²⁴ The theme of protection occurs repeatedly. In the “Sorrows of Isis” text, the god Thoth addressed Isis, urging her, “Hide yourself with your child; his limbs will grow, he will grow wholly strong, and he shall be made to sit upon the throne of his father.”²⁵ And Isis herself later declares in the same text, “I am Isis, who conceived her male child and was heavy with Horus. A goddess, I bore Horus, son of Osiris, within a nest of papyrus plants. I rejoiced over it greatly, twice, because I saw (in him) one who would answer for his father. I hid him, I concealed him.”²⁶

10. One final episode, drawn from Plutarch’s account, seems

²³ Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 2: 150. As Rundle paraphrases the episode, “Isis was unable to bring her beloved back to life in the full sense, but she contrived to revive him sufficiently to be able to conceive a son by him”: *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, 106.

²⁴ Budge dated the “Hymn to Osiris” to 1500 B.C.E. (*ibid.*, 149).

²⁵ Budge, *ibid.*, 222-23 (modified).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 233-34.

incidental but bears note for my purpose. As Horus grew up, his father Osiris came to him “from the other world and exercised and trained him” for battle against Seth (whom Plutarch calls Typhon). Osiris quizzed his son concerning which animal form Horus would prefer to take on for the purpose of combat and was surprised by his son’s answer. Rather than a lion, Horus chose a horse, because “a horse served best for cutting off the flight of an enemy and annihilating him” (*On Isis and Osiris* 19). The anecdote reminds us that the Osiris-Isis-Horus mythological fabric was never far removed from the ideology of kingship: Horus shares the Pharaohs’ pride in the prowess of Egyptian chariotry.

Throughout these episodes, it is Isis’ intervention that allows for the reconstitution of Osiris (and, by assimilation, the deceased Pharaoh) in the underworld and the ascendancy and triumph of Horus (and the reigning Pharaoh). In ideological terms, her actions guarantee the continuity and stability of the dynasty over successive reigns. While aspects of this mythological fabric resemble other ancient near eastern myth cycles in other agrarian empires—the Baal-Anat cycle from Ugarit, for example—they also reveal a distinctly Egyptian venue: Isis’ association with the Nile, the mummification of Osiris, the repeated references to Egyptian cult sites, Isis’ depiction riding or steering distinctly Egyptian barges, and the depiction of Isis giving birth to Horus and nursing and sheltering him among the papyrus swamps of the Nile.

III. Echoes of the Osiris-Isis-Horus Myth in the Exodus Story

What does all this have to do with Exodus? Here we touch on a point of some controversy in current scholarship. It has long been recognized that some aspects of the Exodus narrative have connections with the Egyptian environment: perhaps most obviously, Moses’ name,²⁷ and the contest between Moses and Aaron and pharaoh’s magicians.²⁸ But these perceived connections usually are *not* taken to involve the gods of Egypt. This is

²⁷ On Moses’ name see now most recently Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 140-42.

²⁸ Note that ancient Egyptian hymns celebrated Isis’ mastery over power through sacred word, i.e. verbal magic, particularly in controlling the lethal and life-giving power attributed to snakes: Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, vol. 2.

curious, because at a climactic moment in the narrative, in Exodus 12, the LORD commands the observance of the first Passover and promises to “strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments; I am the LORD” (Exod 12:12). Indeed, some scholars have proposed that one or another of the plagues—with their contamination of the Nile and their assaults on specific animals—represent a narrative insult to specific Egyptian gods.²⁹ Against these proposals, however, Moshe Greenberg observed that despite the reference in the text to “judgments” on “all the gods of Egypt,” the Exodus story never names a single Egyptian deity; none of “the gods of Egypt” plays any role in the narrative. That single utterance from the LORD thus appears “incidental” to the story.³⁰ James K. Hoffmeier has argued that the real contest in Exodus is between the LORD and Pharaoh, *not* the Egyptian gods, and clearly that is how the narrative unfolds.³¹ Because of what might therefore be called the theistic austerity of the Exodus narrative, and because of the dominance in American and British scholarship of the Wright-Albright school and the quest to establish the historicity of the biblical narrative, scholars have devoted far more attention to identifying historical and environmental bases for the plagues than to their mythological character.³²

²⁹ J. J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); C. F. Aling, *Egypt and Bible History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

³⁰ As Moshe Greenberg observes, attempts to see “the plague stories in fact know of only one God, the God of Israel, and his antagonists are not the gods of Egypt . . . but Pharaoh and (at first) Pharaoh’s magicians. These magicians operate ‘atheistically,’ through spells, never once invoking the gods (as did the real-life magicians of Egypt known to us from native sources). . . . The notion that the plagues involve a battle of gods is utterly alien to the biblical account of them” (*Understanding Exodus* [New York: Behrman House, 1969], 200-1).

³¹ See James K. Hoffmeier, “Egypt, Plagues in,” *ABD* 2:375-78, depending in part on idem, “Sacred” in *the Vocabulary of Ancient Egypt* (*Orbis biblicus et orientalis* 59; Freiburg: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1985).

³² Hoffmeier sets his work on “Israel in Egypt” squarely in the context of the “collapse” of the Wright-Albright synthesis, under the epigram “How have the mighty fallen?” and argues for evidence of Israel’s historical memory of events in Egypt (*Israel in Egypt*, chap. 1). G. Hort offered a systematic attempt to explain the plagues as a sequence of naturally occurring environmental events precipitated by an increase in flagellates due to the inundation of the Nile: “The Plagues of Egypt,” *ZAW* 69 (1957), 84-103 and 70 (1958), 48-59—an argument that presents some scholars with a theological challenge: do they embrace a possible demonstration of the biblical narrative’s historicity at the cost of

Exodus as the Subversion of Egyptian

The following points of comparison suggest, however, that the Osiris-Isis-Horus myth is nevertheless in the narrative air at specific points in the Exodus narrative. Due to the constraints of this presentation I offer these comparisons here in distilled form.

1. It is not the coffin of the god Osiris that is set adrift on the Nile, but the basket containing the Hebrew infant Moses (Exod 2:1-4). Curiously, James Hoffmeier has observed linguistic cognates here without developing the comparison: his interest is in establishing a *historical* connection between the Exodus narrative and Egypt, not in exploring possible *mythological* interactions.³³
2. The infant protected among the papyrus reeds is not Horus, representing Pharaoh, but a Hebrew child who will grow up to challenge Pharaoh in the name and with the power of the LORD. Again, it is curious that the resemblance between these two accounts has been observed—most notably in Donald Redford’s comparative study of child abandonment legends—but because the question has been formulated as one of literary dependence, and framed in terms of *abandonment* rather than *protection* of the child, the resemblances have been discounted.³⁴
3. It is not (as Plutarch narrates) the goddess Isis who endears herself to the maidservants of a royal court, inspiring awe with her glory and the fragrance of her person, and thus making her way into the royal court where she is charged with nursing the king’s son; it is, again, the Hebrew slave woman who is taken into the Pharaoh’s

surrendering its miraculous character?

Terence R. Fretheim takes a different angle on the environmental aspects of the plagues, recognizing a theological (mythological) dimension of the narrative: “The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster,” *JBL* 110:3 (1991), 385-96.

³³ Hoffmeier notes that the Egyptian terms for “coffin” and “papyrus” are cognate with the Hebrew terms for “basket” and papyrus or “bulrushes” (KJV, RSV): *Israel in Egypt*, 138-39.

³⁴ Donald B. Redford, “the Literary Motif of the Exposed Child (cf. Ex ii 1-10),” *Numen* 14 (1967), 209-28. Redford concludes at last that “there are no true parallels” to the Exodus account. Hoffmeier follows Redford’s conclusions (and the direction of his study), *Israel in Egypt*, 136-38.

court as a nurse to that slave child.

4. When a prince is struck down, Isis is not able to revive him by her power; rather the prince is no less than the firstborn of Pharaoh's sons, his heir (and thus the future of his dynasty), and it is the LORD's irreversible act against all the firstborn of Egypt—human and animal alike—for which there is no remedy (7:14–11:10; 12:29–32).
5. When the waters are rolled back by divine power, it is not Isis making a way for her barque as she bears the body of her husband back to Egypt; it is the breath of the LORD that allows the former slaves to cross the *Yam Suph* on dry land (Exod 14:21–22);
6. The Pharaoh's chariots do not represent the mythological supremacy of Horus over all of Egypt's enemies (personified in Seth) but are completely destroyed, "swallowed up," in the *Yam Suph* (Exod 14:23–28).³⁵
7. Thus the transformation achieved at the *Yam Suph*, the "Sea of Reeds" or "Papyrus Swamp," is not the assimilation of Pharaoh into Osiris and his renewal (as in the Pyramid Texts) but his annihilation and, with him, the destruction of the future of the Egyptian dynasty. Remarkably, this parallel has been observed but its mythological import missed.³⁶

³⁵ Fretheim notes a number of literary anticipations in the narrative of Exodus, including the "swallowing up" of the magicians' serpents serving as a "sign" of the eventual "swallowing" of Pharaoh's armies beneath the sea ("The Plagues as Ecological Signs," 388).

³⁶ Here as well, Hoffmeier has recognized the cognates between the Hebrew text and Egyptian mythology—the sea of reeds "is well known from the Pyramid Texts . . . as the place where the deceased king was purified in the celestial sea" (*Israel in Egypt*, 204)—without entertaining the possibility that the Hebrew text is in any way engaged with Egyptian mythology. Hoffmeier's concern is—apparently exclusively—with identifying the geographic location of the *Yam Suph* as a means of defending the historicity of the biblical account.

IV. The Exodus Account as Subversive Parody

What are we to make of these comparisons? When the question has been framed in terms of the literary *dependence* of Exodus on legendary or mythological materials from Egyptian or Mesopotamian sources, the standard of comparison has been set arbitrarily high, allowing scholars invested in the historicity of the biblical narrative to declare that there are “no true parallels” in those sources for the Exodus account. I propose, in contrast, that we foreground

- the *pattern* of resemblances between Hebrew and Egyptian mythical motifs rather than seeking an exact match between any two episodes;
- the potency of *allusion* even without explicit citation (which is absent, since the Egyptian gods play no explicit role in the Exodus narrative);
- and, following Terence Fretheim, the hyperbolic language used to describe the disruption of the ordered world and the *ironic reversal* of symbolic or mythological motifs related to the power of Pharaoh.³⁷

On the basis of these features I suggest that we are dealing in parts of Exodus with a subversive parody of Egyptian mythology. It is not that the Egyptian gods are (so to speak) brought recognizably on stage, but that some of their characteristic actions—significantly, actions of fundamental symbolic importance for the stability of the Egyptian dynasty—are mimed by other characters: not only by Israel’s god, the LORD, but by the anti-characters—ostensibly polar opposites to the glorious, powerful figures of Egyptian myth—through whom the LORD’s purposes are accomplished. One powerful and, I suggest, *an intended* effect of the Exodus account operates *at the level of mythology*, specifically, the myths involved in the

³⁷ Fretheim refers to the “ironic reversal” of the designation of Pharaoh as “serpent,” *tannin*, in Exod. 7:8-13; he also notes the hyperbolic character of the language that intensifies through the course of the plague narrative (“The Plagues as Ecological Signs”).

distinctly Egyptian ideology of kingship. We are not dealing in Exodus with an “ancient” or “primitive” attempt to explain, in mythic terms, otherwise bewildering natural events (earthquakes, atmospheric effects, naturally occurring environmental imbalances, etc.). To the extent something else is going on, modern attempts to develop scientific explanations for reconstructing “what really happened” as *natural* phenomena rather miss the point.

Of course, parody only “works” when the intended audience recognizes its true target. My proposal therefore requires (1) that the composition of these narrative elements into a cohesive account was carried out by authors familiar with important aspects of the Osiris-Isis-Horus mythology; (2) that it was intended for an audience that could be expected to recognize those same mythological elements *and* their subversion; and (3) that the effective power of the Egyptian myth to legitimize imperial power was imposing enough that the effort to subvert it seemed worthwhile—and the choice to subvert it *through indirect, implicit means* seemed necessary.

Just when did this parodic narrative take shape, and among what community? I should be clear that I am not asking about the correlates of historical reminiscence. I do not think the acquaintance with Egyptian mythology that I am postulating here requires historical reminiscence or brings the composition of the narrative closer to “what really happened.”³⁸ I am asking, rather, when did a narrator or narrators, conversant with and engaged by significant elements of kingship mythology in Egypt, compose a narrative parodying those elements for an audience they expected to get the joke?

This is, I concede, the weakest element in my proposal. I am simply not prepared to venture a specific hypothesis regarding the date of composition or to adjudicate competing proposals for attributing elements of the Exodus narrative to J, E, JE, P, or Deuteronomistic redaction. While Solomon’s court might appear a likely candidate, given its connection with Egypt, it is for just that reason not clear to me that the court would have provided a nurturing climate for anti-Egyptian parody.³⁹ Sixth-

³⁸ Therefore I do not see how these reflections, if confirmed, could play any role in the sort of effort James Hoffmeier has exerted to find “Israel in Egypt.”

³⁹ Hoffmeier suggests that Hebrew-Egyptian cognates point to Solomon’s monarchy, “when close political and cultural ties with Egypt existed,” but does not explain how

Exodus as the Subversion of Egyptian

century Jerusalem might also be as attractive a candidate, since Jeremiah inveighs against the “gods of Egypt” at a time when Egypt seemed an attractive, even seductive refuge from the threat of Babylon (Jeremiah 43).⁴⁰ But demonstrating such a correlation is beyond my ability; I must content myself here with highlighting the mythological and ideological context in which and against which aspects of the Exodus account would have spoken with particular power. If my observations bear weight, seeking answers to those further tradition- and composition-historical questions would be an appropriate next step in the investigation of Hebrew epic.

those close ties might have informed so anti-Egyptian a narrative (*Israel in Egypt*, 140).

⁴⁰ Locating a parody of Egyptian mythology in Jeremiah’s context would suggest that if “Babylon peculiarly occupies the imagination of Israel” in this period, it does not do so alone; so does Egypt. See Walter Brueggemann, “At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Rereading of the Empire,” *JBL* 110:1 (1991), 3-22.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Assmann, Jan. *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Babbitt, F. C. *Plutarch's Moralia*, Vol. V, LCL. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Budge, E. A. Wallis. *The Gods of the Egyptians: Studies in Egyptian Mythology*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Open Court; London: Methuen 1904; reprint New York: Dover, 1969.
- _____. *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection* 2 vols. London: Warner, 1911; reprint in one volume, New York: University Books, 1961.
- Cross, Frank Moore. *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973.
- Frankfort, Henri *Ancient Egyptian Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1948.
- Frankfort, Henri. *Kingship and the Gods*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948.
- Gottwald, Norman K. *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).
- Halpern, Baruch. *The Emergence of Israel in Canaan*, SBLMS 29. Chico: Scholars, 1983.
- Meltzer, Edmund S. "Horus," *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*, ed. Donald B. Redford. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Mendenhall, George. "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, vol. 3. Garden City: Doubleday, 1970.
- _____. *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context*, ed. Gary Herion. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).
- Miller, Patrick. *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973.
- Mircea Eliade. *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 1: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, trans. Willard R. Trask. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Roberts, J. J. M. "Ancient Near Eastern Environment," *The Hebrew Bible*

Exodus as the Subversion of Egyptian

and Its Modern Interpreters, ed. Douglas Knight and Gene Tucker.
Philadelphia and Chico: Fortress and Scholars, 1985.