

Randall C. Bailey

“And they shall know that I am
YHWH!“:

The P Recasting
of the Plague Narratives in
Exodus 7-11

Scholars have long been intrigued by the block of material in Exodus 7-11, which is commonly called the “10 Plagues,” almost like the analogue to the “10 Commandments.” Treatment of this material has been guided by each facet of nineteenth and twentieth centuries Eurocentric biblical scholarship, from source, to form, to redaction, to new literary criticism. Attempts have thus been made to divide up and to keep whole these units and sub-units. In so doing there have been a wide range of organizing schema from doublets to three groupings of three,¹ to two groupings of five in chiasmic structure,² and so forth. There have also been suggestions of royal court, prophetic and cultic settings for these narratives. All have agreed that each organizing scheme has some merit to it but that there is at least one major flaw in each.

What has not been tried has been the abandoning of the

¹Cf. Moshe Greenberg, “The Thematic Unity of Exodus iii-xi,” in *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1967), I:151-54. A fuller treatment is found in his *Understanding Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel III*, (New York: Behrman House, 1969). In the former he argues that, “Plagues one, four and seven all begin with a variation of the following charge: ‘Go to pharaoh in the morning as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile.’ Plagues two, five, and eight all begin, ‘The Lord said to Moses, Go to Pharaoh and say to him: Thus said the Lord, let my people go that they may worship me.’ Plagues three, six, and nine all begin with a command to the Hebrew leaders to do something that will set the plague in motion—there is never a warning. That is to say, the plagues are arranged in three by formal criteria alone (153).”

²Dennis J. McCarthy, “Moses’ Dealings with Pharaoh: Ex 7,8-10, 27,” *CBQ* 27 (1965): 336-45.

notion of a "10 Plague" sequence and just dealing with one or the other of the sources as a coherent unit unto itself with its own intention. In other words, while there has been agreement on at least two or three major source divisions within the block, primarily J, E, and P,³ and there has been agreement as to the differences in structure between them, for example, Moses appears alone in J and E and Moses and Aaron in P, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart uses *kabēd* in the *pi`el*, *ḥazaq* in the *qal* and the *hiphi`l*, and the presence of so called "magicians" or just Pharaoh, and the like. There has not been treatment of any one source as a coherent narrative unto itself. Rather the division into sources has little impact on the analysis of the intention and focus of the treatment of the "plague narratives" by the source.

While Childs has argued,

It is a source of frustration common to most readers of commentaries that so much energy is spent on the analysis of the pre-history of a text as to leave little for a treatment of the passage in its final form...On the one hand, by incorporating the full richness and variety of the individual sources into the themes, one's understanding of the narrative can be enriched rather than impoverished by reductionist generalizations. On the other hand, the interpreting of the sources within the thematic framework of the whole passage prevents the exegesis from becoming unduly fragmented.⁴

the treatment in commentaries has been that of arguing for a unified theme within these units. Even those who argue for sources interpret the unit from Exodus 7-11 in line with Cassuto's understanding that

This section forms the focal point of the Biblical account of the bondage and liberation, describing seriatim, the Divine acts that brought retribution on Pharaoh and his servants because of the enslavement of the Israelites, and, in the end, compelled them to let Israel go free from midst of their people.⁵

³Most people follow the source divisions presented by Martin North in *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972, 268.

⁴Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary*, OTL, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 149, 151.

⁵U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 92.

In other words, the way that one constructs a "10 plague sequence," is by doing a final form reading of the text. No one source has all ten. Thus, what I am proposing is going against such a reading, and instead only dealing with the narratives of one of the sources, namely P, and to do a literary critical analysis of it. It should be noted that this is different from source and redaction critical approaches which speak to supplementary work of P in attempting to broaden and complement the earlier traditions.⁶

Therefore, my intention in this article is to review the units ascribed to P by Noth, Ex 7:8-13, 19, 20aa, 21b-22, 8: 5-7, 15bb, 16-19, 9:8-12, and to demonstrate first that they are a coherent narrative, with a distinct message and theme, namely the confrontation between the religion of YHWH with the religion of Egypt. Secondly, I will argue that this complex has been misunderstood as part of the "10 Plague" sequence, even though this was not its original intention. Finally, I will argue that this block of P material has the agenda of furthering a program of the Priestly school, namely a de-Africanization or anti-African polemic and replacement of liberation motifs with piety, but this focus has been lost by the P materials having been interpolated into the larger J and E plague narratives.⁷

⁶In this regard one can review the work of Robert B. Coote and David Robert Ord, *In the Beginning: Creation and the Priestly History*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 46-47 and Ziony Zevit, "The Priestly Redaction and Interpretation of the Plague Narrative in Exodus," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 66(1976): 193-211. Both of these works connect the P plague narratives to terminology in the creation narrative of Gen 1:1ff and see it as expanding the "cosmic" nature of the plague account of J/E.

⁷This argument is a continuation of similar points I have made in other articles on P materials, namely "I Sure Wish There Was Some Light Around Here: The Character, Elohim, in Gen 1:1-24a," *Biblical Interpretation*, [forthcoming]; "They're Nothing But Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives," in F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, [forthcoming]); and "Is That Any Name for a Nice Hebrew Boy: Ex 2:1-10 - the De-Africanization of an Israelite Hero," in R.C. Bailey and J. Grant, eds., *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 25-36.

Analysis of P Narratives in Exodus 7-11

As P tells the story, YHWH told Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh and, when asked by him to work a miracle, Aaron was to throw down his rod on the ground and it would become a serpent. When he does this, Pharaoh calls the *ḥækamîm*, the wise persons, the *mākāšpîm*, generally translated sorcerers, and the *ḥartûmmîm*, generally translated magicians, who replicate the act. Aaron's serpent eats theirs, thereby besting them. Pharaoh's heart was hard and he didn't listen to them. (Ex 7:8-13)⁸

YHWH instructs Moses to tell Aaron to take his rod again and stretch it over all the waterways in Egypt, its rivers, canals, and ponds, so that the water will turn to blood, which he did and it happened. The *ḥartûmmîm* again replicate the action, so Pharaoh's heart remains hard, as YHWH had said. (7:19-20a, 21b-23).

YHWH again instructs Moses to tell Aaron to stretch out his rod again so that frogs will come up out of the waterways all over Egypt, which he does. The *ḥartûmmîm* again replicate the act and Pharaoh would not listen (8:5-7 [1-3 MT], 15b [11b]).

YHWH again instructs Moses to have Aaron stretch out his rod and strike the dust of the earth so that gnats would appear all over Egypt. The *ḥartûmmîm* again try to replicate the act but are not able to do so and testify to Pharaoh that the finger of 'Elohim, God, is involved, but Pharaoh wouldn't listen, as YHWH predicted (8:16-19 [12-15]).

YHWH again instructs Moses and Aaron to take handfuls of ashes from a kiln and throw it in the air before Pharaoh. They

⁸Brevard Childs argues for excluding this unit from the plague sequence because, "the miracle which he performs was in no sense a plague and even in its structure lay outside the sequence of the ten ensuing disasters" (*Exodus*, 151.).

do it and boils break out on all the people, including the *ḥartûmmîm*. YHWH hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not listen to them. (9:8-12).

YHWH reveals to Moses that Pharaoh wasn't allowed to listen to them so that YHWH's wonders could be multiplied and Moses and Aaron did all that YHWH had instructed them to do, but since Pharaoh's heart was hardened, he did not let the Israelites go (11:9-10).

As one readily sees, this unit has a clear beginning and ending. There is a recurring theme of YHWH initiating an action and Aaron performing a magical act before Pharaoh. This action is replicated by the *ḥartûmmîm*. This ritual occurs three times. On the fourth time the *ḥartûmmîm* are unable to replicate the action, and on the fifth time they themselves are afflicted by the action of Aaron. The narrative concludes with a theological explanation of these series of actions, namely to show YHWH's power. Since there are no more actions which Aaron is to perform, one could conclude that the purpose of all of this was for Aaron to best the *ḥartûmmîm*, to get them to "cry uncle," a point to which I shall return later.

When these stories are read one after the other, as I have just done, it appears that these actions take place with the same actors in the same room at the same time. In other words, the action begins in 7:8, with Moses and Aaron on the scene. In 7:10 they go to Pharaoh. In 7:11 Pharaoh summonses the *ḥartûmmîm*, et. al. After this there are no entrances nor exits of characters onto or from the scene. As P tells the story these actions of Aaron and the Egyptian officials take place in a rapid succession, at the same time and in the same place. There are in the text notices of exits and entrances from the scene, such as in 7:15, and notices of passage of time, such as in 7:25, but all of these are in the J/E plague narratives. None of them are in the P passages. This point helps to demonstrate my contention that originally these narra-

tives were a coherent, independent story, which has been interpolated into the J/E plague narratives.⁹ I shall later return to the significance of this point, also.

Throughout all of this Pharaoh sits and watches and does not respond. The narrator is quick to tell us, though, that Pharaoh is a pawn of YHWH, who has hardened Pharaoh's heart so that the signs and wonders can be performed. In fact other than calling out the troops, the *ḥækamîm*, and the *ḥartûmmîm*, when the first action was performed, Pharaoh does nothing else in this unit, furthering my contention that the main object is the *ḥartûmmîm* and not Pharaoh.

This is in sharp contrast to the J/E narrative, where Pharaoh is a major actor and foil to Moses. As Sternberg characterizes the plot,

Moses and Pharaoh get locked in a conflict of national interests...Accordingly, even apart from all ideological and aesthetic determinants peculiar to the Bible, the interfigural play of viewpoint is dictated by the most basic exigencies of narrative: for the characters to clash and make peace as dramatic agents, they must clash and make peace as fallible subjects.¹⁰

While Sternberg would argue for the final form, the depiction of the characters of Pharaoh and Moses fade into the background in this P rendering of the plot. As opposed to Sternberg's correct analysis of part of the plot found in Exodus 7-11, my plot summary above evidences none of this interfigural play between Moses and Pharaoh. Rather the play is between Aaron and the *ḥartûmmîm*.

⁹As Childs notes, "The original P sequence of the plagues as signs which climaxed in the defeat of the Egyptian magicians was subsumed with J's framework of the plagues. The contest became a subordinate theme. While fusion between signs and plagues seemed to have begun early in the oral stage, certainly the final merger occurred on the literary level." (*Exodus*, 140-1).

¹⁰Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1985), 172.

One has to note the comical or farcical nature of this narrative. One can almost hear Aaron and the *ḥartummîm* singing, "Anything you can do, I can do better, I can do anything better than you! No you can't! Yes I can!" and so forth. One also has to laugh at the impossibility of Aaron turning all the water into blood and then the statement that the *ḥartummîm* did the same thing. It would make more sense for them to have reversed the action and turned it back into water; similarly, with the frogs. Having been overcome by frogs, why do they increase the number? This appears to be farcical.¹¹ How was one to distinguish between the Aaronite and Egyptian frogs? And where is Pharaoh in all of this?

Noticeably absent from this P narrative are references to the liberation from Egypt. There is no dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh on this point, as there are in the J/E narratives (e.g. 7:14-18, 26-29 [8:1-4], etc). There is no request for the liberation of the Israelites nor is one denied. Instead the narrator closes the unit by saying that the purpose was for the wonders of YHWH to be manifest. What happened to "Go down Moses, tell 'ole Pharaoh to 'Let my people go!'"? Not only is this a surprising omission, but once the commentators note it, they supply the reader

¹¹As Y. T. Radday states, "I think this is delightful humour at the expense of the inane court sorcerers which has been overlooked by most commentators. [cf "On Missing the Humour in the Bible: An Introduction," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, JSOTS 92, Y. T. Radday & A. Brenner, eds., (Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 22.

with the liberation formula absent from the text.¹² Thus one would have to conclude that there must be, or I can imagine some readers saying, there better be more to this contest with the *ḥartūmmîm* than immediately hits the eye, since we all know that the liberation from Egypt, the Exodus, is foremost on everyone in the text's mind, right? Wrong!

The first point to be made is that it is Aaron¹³ being the primary actor in the text which helps us in our source divisions. In this regard, it is important to recall that Aaron is destined in another twenty chapters to be named the head of the priestly line of Israel (Ex 28:1-29:46). In fact it is this bit of information which clues the reader as to what might be going on in this text, namely we have a future "High Priest" performing miracles in the name of his deity, in a kind of on the job training.

This interpretation becomes more plausible once we realize that the *ḥartūmmîm* are also priests. Josephus refers to them as priests, *tous hierois*.¹⁴ Almost universally, translators call them "magicians," but as Vergote has demonstrated, the word *ḥartūmmîm* is derived from the Egyptian word for those religious functionaries

¹²G. W. Coates states, "A succession of episodes pits Moses and Aaron against the Pharaoh in dogged negotiations for the release of the people. Regularly, each scene begins with a speech from the Lord, addressed to Moses or Moses and Aaron together. Regularly, the speech specifies instructions for establishing a sign. Commonly, *but not on every occasion*, the instructions send Moses or Moses and Aaron to the Pharaoh in order to negotiate for permission to leave the land with the people [emphasis mine]." Moses: *Heroic Man, Man of God*, JSOTS 57, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1988), 89.

¹³John R. Spencer argues that, "The meaning of the name 'Aaron' is uncertain, although it is perhaps derived from Egyptian." cf "Aaron," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols, D.N. Friedman, ed., (New York: Doubleday, 1992), I:1. Dr. Thomas Scott has pointed out to me that in Egyptian '3 nr (pronounce *au en re*) would mean "great of speech" (literally 'mouth'). While this does not account for the o, and instead has the e, and the position of the n (designating the genitive) is out of sequence for Egyptian, there is similarity to the legend in Ex 4:14-17, and the role he is to play as a spokesperson.

¹⁴Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books I-IV, Loeb Classical Library 242, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1930), 285, 288.

who did the incantations in the temples in Egypt, the *ḥry-tp*.¹⁵ Interestingly, Hyatt notes this connection but does not carry the significance beyond the word recognition. I am indebted to him, however, since this note gave me the impetus to seek other such word plays.

It appears that the LXX translators understood these people to be religious functionaries by their designating them *hoi epaoidoi*, the ones who sang incantations. I realize that we have all been trained to translate *pharmakos*, the LXX rendition of *mākašpîm*, as sorcerer, and *epaoidoi*, the LXX rendition of *ḥartûmmîm*, as charm-ers, but such need only be the meaning of these words, if we are trying to denigrate the religion of another people.¹⁶ In fact it appears that our English translations are more conditioned by Jerome's rendering of *ḥartûmmîm* as *malefici*, "evil doers," which is not the only Latin term for "magician," since he could have used *magus*.¹⁷

¹⁵Cf. J. Vergote, *Joseph en 'Egypt: Gènesè ch. 37-50 à la lumière des études égyptologiques récentes*, (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1959), 66-73, as cited in J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus*, NCBC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 104 and John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC 3, (Waco: Word Books, 1987) 90. While not totally agreeing with Vergote, W. L. Humphreys argues that not only in this unit but also in Gen 41:8 Joseph bests both the *haekamim* and the *hartumim* in interpreting Pharaoh's dream. cf. *Joseph and His Family: A Literary Study*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1988) 167-8.

¹⁶A prime example of such hermeneutics of denegration is found in John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, Second Edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). In it he reviews four "conservative scholarly" explanations of how the "magicians" did the same acts that Aaron did. In referring to Aaron, who is under the direction of God, these acts are referred to as "miracles." In reference to the *ḥartûmmîm*, they are magic illusions or demonic possession (89-92).

¹⁷One should not be surprised by Jerome's negative innuendo, since he is the one who gave us "black but beautiful" in Song of Songs 1:5, contrary to MT and LXX. What is interesting is to see how the Reformers, such as Luther and Tyndale, as well as the translators of KJV, and modern translations, including the NRSV, seem to follow this trend of negative depiction of these priests in line with Jerome and the *Vulgate*, instead of following the Greek and Hebrew. Cf. Charles B. Copher, "Racial Myths and Biblical Scholarship: Some Random Notes and Observations," 121-31, in *Black Biblical Studies: An Anthology of Charles B. Copher*, Biblical and Theological Issues on the Black Presence in the Bible, (Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1993).

Given the reorientation as regards the meaning of these terms, I contend that in this group of texts there is a confrontation between two religious functionaries, those of Egypt with the soon-to-be one of Israel. Thus, contrary to the treatment of these units by most commentaries, in this unit we have more than the common understanding of P highlighting the role of Aaron. Rather we have here a carefully constructed meeting of the minds of these religious functionaries. One is thus bemused by the words of caution in the commentaries not to mistake Aaron for a magician, since Aaron is doing the will of YHWH, while the other people are practicing magic. In other words, one should not be confused by Aaron being able to do the same types of things that the so-called "magicians" can do.¹⁸

It is not just the meeting of priests in this unit, however, which suggests that this is a confrontation between Yahwism and Egyptian religion. As we look at the objects which are produced by Aaron and the *ḥartūmmîm*, we see direct connections between them and Egyptian religion.¹⁹ The first is the serpent which Aaron produces in 7:10. This unit should not be seen in connection with the action of Moses in Ex 4:3, since there is the difference in vocabulary in both units, namely *naḥaš*, snake, in ch 4 and *tannîn*, serpent, in this unit. Additionally the intended audience of ch 4 is the children of Israel while here it is the Egyptian officials.²⁰

The difference in terminology is so significant that I would argue the parallel between Exodus 4 and 7 is incorrect. On the

¹⁸As G. Pixley argues, "The evidence seems to show that what Moses and Aaron have done is just a magic trick." cf. *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), 46.

¹⁹I am greatly indebted to Dr. Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary for setting me on the trail for the following matches in Egyptian religion. In discussing my thesis for this article with him, he pointed out that the contest theme would not hold, since there were no other cultic references in the narrative. It was, thus, this challenge, which raised a crucial and helpful search.

²⁰So also Durham, *Exodus*, 91 and Hyatt, *Exodus*, 104.

one hand the term *tannîn* appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Canon often in conjunction with the Leviathan and is seen as a dragon or sea monster.²¹ It should be noted that LXX uses *drakon* for *tannîn*.²²

The connection of *tannîn* to Egypt is most interesting in that in Egyptian *Tentenit* is the name of the serpent on the royal crown in Egypt and *Tenten* is the name for the snake which threatens the barge of Re on its way to the underworld. Thus, the writer here gives us a confrontation between the *tannîn* of Israel, which Elohim created in Gen 1:21, and the *tenten* of Egypt, and proclaims that the religion of YHWH, represented by *tannîn*, is more powerful than the religion of the Egyptian gods, represented by *Tenten*, which is swallowed by the former.²³ Let me state that I am consciously formulating the argument this way, since it is not the Israelite and Egyptian deities who are combating in our unit. Rather it is their functionaries. Thus this is more than Cassuto's speculation that "There is undoubtedly here an element of irony and satire."²⁴

The Nile was viewed as a deity in Egypt and is closely associated with Nu and Osiris along with other deities. Its relationship to the life, both physical and economic, of the people is well attested.²⁵ Similarly, its relationship to other water masses in Egypt and their qualities as deities is also attested.²⁶ Thus the ability to transfer them from their life-giving function as water which inundates and nurtures to blood which kills off water life, be

²¹21 Gen 1:21, Ps74:13; 91:13; 148:7; Is 27:1; '1: 9; Jer 51:34; and Exek 29:3; 32:2.

²²This is also a figurative term used in the New Testament for the devil. Cf BAG, 205c.

²³I am indebted to Ms. Stacy Andres an MA graduate of General Theological Seminary, who assisted in the research for this part of the article.

²⁴Exodus, 96.

²⁵Cf. E.A.W. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians: or Studies in Egyptian Mythology*, 2 vols, (New York: Dover, 1969), 44-45 and Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 190-5.

²⁶Cf. Hermann Kees, *Ancient Egypt: A Cultural Typography*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 48 223-5.

came a major assault on the foundations of the Egyptian religion.

Similarly the term used for gnat in 8:12, *kînnam*, is a *hapax legomenon*, a word which only appears once in the canon. The appeal to the translation of this term as meaning gnat is the fact that this unit is located next to the "plague of flies" in 8:16f. Interestingly, though, the Egyptian word for gnat is *khenus*, while the word *khnemes* refers to flies, mosquitoes and insects which carry diseases. Thus, the Egyptian *ḥartûmmîm* are unable to use their priestly pharmaceutical skills to replicate this action.

While not a loan word, the frogs are most interesting, since they, like the serpent, are symbols used for an Egyptian god and for primordial creatures within their creation mythology. On the one hand there is mention of the Temple of *Heqit*, the Frog Goddess, who was a goddess of reproduction and resurrection. On the other hand the primeval waters were said to be inhabited by four snakes and four frogs.²⁷

Thus, we see that there are several direct connections within this text between Egyptian religion and the actions of Aaron and the *ḥartûmmîm*. What is striking also is that the narrator gives a sequence in which Aaron, functioning in the Egyptian palace, confronts the *ḥartûmmîm* on their home turf, so to speak, and beats them at their own religious symbols. Thus, we see why Pharaoh is in the background. This is a confrontation over the religions of the two people, and Aaron is more than just a fixture in this narrative. Were Moses to be the main actor, as he is in J and E, the point could not be made. Similarly, were there any mention of the liberation, the intention of the narrator to create this ritual "show-down at the OK corral" would be lost.

²⁷H and H. A. Frankfort, "Myth and Reality," in Henri Frankfort, H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1946), 10.

Intriguingly, this intention is signalled by a pun used by the writer. In the last contest scene where the *ḥartūmmîm* are inflicted with boils by Aaron throwing *piaḥ* from a kiln or furnace in the air. The term *piaḥ* is another hapax legomenon. It is generally translated as soot or ashes. On the one hand *peḥtes* in Egyptian means black. More interestingly, however, is the meaning of *peḥ*, which means to “arrive at a journey or destination, to arrive at the end of a matter.”²⁸ Thus, in Aaron throwing this *piaḥ* into the air which incapacitates the *ḥartūmmîm*, there is not only the connection with black material, but there is the pun that this matter will bring about the end of the contest.²⁹

“Plague” vs. “Sign” Narratives

Given this rendering of the P materials in Exodus 7-11 we would have to ask ourselves, are these narratives legitimately referred to as “Plague Narratives?” One would think not for several reasons. First, the term for plague coming from YHWH striking the people, *nagap/magēpah*, which is found in the J and E plague narratives, is absent from these narratives. Rather in its stead the formula, *’ôtôt ûmôpātîm*, signs and wonders is used. As we look at this formula more closely in P, we note that it is radically different from its usage in other parts of the canon, especially in the Deuteronomic passages and in the prophets. In these other parts of the canon, the formula refers specifically to the actions of YHWH which bring about the liberation from Egypt. In these P passages,

²⁸E.A. Wallis Budge, *A Hieroglyphic Vocabulary to the Book of the Dead*, (New York: Dover, 1991), 244a.

²⁹Coates seems to miss this when he argues that “11:9-10 marks a conclusion to the negotiations . . . Moreover, it suggests that for P the negotiations end in failure (*Moses*, 102).” My contention is that this is not a negotiation, rather it is a contest.

however, the signs and wonders are those miracle or magical actions which are performed in front of Pharaoh in the presence of the *ḥartûmmîm* in order to show him the might and power of YHWH. In fact this shift in terminology away from liberation to divine self-revelation is seen in the P ending to the book of Deuteronomy, in which the grammatical subject of the 'ôtôt *ûmôpâtîm* is switched from YHWH to Moses, who performed such before Pharaoh.

Secondly, in the unit preceding the so-called "plague narratives" in Ex 7:1-7, the formula 'ôtôt *ûmôpâtîm* is used in v. 3 as the consequence of YHWH hardening Pharaoh's heart.³⁰ In fact it is the *šapatîm gadôlîm*, the mighty acts of judgment of YHWH, which bring about the liberation (7:4b), not the 'ôtôt *ûmôpâtîm*. In other words, the function of these "signs and wonders" are to point the way to the power of YHWH and to convince the Egyptians of the true power of the Israelite deity.³¹ Their function is not to bring about the liberation of the Israelites.

P's Anti-African Polemic

The question still remains, how does this reading of the P "signs and wonders" narratives fit within the overall treatment of the Exodus traditions by P. In the first place, the P "Moses call narrative" in Exodus 6 begins the muting of the liberation theme. On the one hand the J and E language of oppression, *`anî* and *laḥaṣ* in Ex 3:7 and 9, is changed in Exodus 6 to *səbalaḥ*, burden, the term for normal economic relationships by a colonial power. Similarly,

³⁰Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 87.

³¹cf. J. Helfmeyer, "wt," in G. eds, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Botterweck and H. Ringgren, 5 vols, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1974), 168-70.

in Exodus 6 Moses is not sent to tell Pharaoh anything. Rather Moses is sent to inform the children of Israel of YHWH's special relationship to them. Thus in this unit P continues to argue that Pharaoh is not the problem. Rather Pharaoh is little more than a pawn of YHWH, as happens also in Exodus 7-11.

Secondly, the major problem as P sees it in Ex 6 is the lack of faith of the children of Israel in YHWH, which is shown in the fourfold use of the formula 'anî yhwḥ, I am the LORD, in Ex 6:2, 6, 7, 8 and their rejection of Moses' message to them. Thus, the theme of YHWH having to prove YHWHself is already a major component of the recasting of the exodus motif by P. What is needed to be learned from the Exodus event, according to P, is not the need for some new socio-political movement, as some of the older traditions might inspire. Rather what is needed is more faith in YHWH as superior to any other deity. Thus, in Exodus 7-11 P is trying to replace completely the J and E confrontation with Pharaoh over liberation by recasting it as a contest between religious functionaries.

Thirdly, P has since the beginning of the book, if not before, been poking fun at the Egyptians and their institutions. In Ex 1:10 P presents us with a new Pharaoh who "knows not Joseph." Clearly this king could not be too intelligent if he does not even know his own nation's history. This is also the same king who declares his intentions to "deal shrewdly," *nithakamah*, a *hithpa'el* of *ḥkm*, the verb for wise, with Israel. On the one hand, this verb plays off the traditional Israelite veneration of Egyptian wisdom.³² On the other hand it debunks the veneration, since the "shrewd policies" of this king lead not to diminution of Israel, but

³²See my discussion of the veneration of Egyptian wisdom in Ancient Israel in "Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives," 175, in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Cain Hope Felder, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

rather to a variation on the "be fruitful and multiply" formula, in that their numbers increase. The Israelites flourish under his "wise" attempt to diminish them. Thus, he is as comical a figure as will be his daughter who uses bad Hebrew grammar to name Moses in Ex 2:10, and as are the *ḥartummîm* in our unit.

At the same time P is aware that this veneration of Egyptian religion by ancient Israel must be confronted head on. P begins this with the switch of mythological base from Egypt to Mesopotamea in Genesis 1 and continues it with redefining the source of circumcision in Genesis 17. For too long the Israelite hope for universal appeal of Yahwism was repeatedly described as the validation of Yahwism by the Egyptian/African acceptance of it. This is seen in passages like Ps 68:29-31,

Because of your temple at Jerusalem kings bear gifts to you...

Let bronze be brought from Egypt;

Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God

and Is 45:14,

Thus says YHWH,

the wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia,

and the Sabceans, tall of stature,

shall come over to you and be yours;

they shall follow you;

they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.

They will make supplication to you, saying,

"God is with you alone, and there is no other;

there is no god besides him."

as the NRSV translates these verses. For P what was at stake was the need to demonstrate to Israel that YHWH needed no veneration by Egyptians, since YHWH was more powerful than the Egyptian gods. This signs and wonders unit in Exodus 7-11 finally achieves this purpose for P.

In this regard the formula that "Then they will know that I am YHWH" is the desired outcome of a competition, one on

one, between the religion of Israel and that of Egypt. The leaving out the liberation formula is not by chance. It is by design. What needs to be stressed, according to P, is the nature of the deity in relation to other deities. The liberation is secondary. In this regard, Miranda's attempt to fine tune the arguments of Zimmerli and von Rad about the formula "I am YHWH" overstates the liberation intention.³³

Unfortunately for P, this desire to supplant liberation thought with a call to piety did not win out in the tradition. The "signs and wonders" narrative was not allowed to stand alone. Instead it was interpolated into the J/E "plague narrative." In other words it was forced to stand along side the prevailing view of plagues leading to liberation. In so doing, P's tradition was not lost, rather it itself ended up being recast. In the final redaction of the Pentateuch, the "God of Liberation" made more sense than the "God of Contest." As often happens, liberation wins out.

³³Cf. Jose Miranda, *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974), 80-84.