

Theology of Exodus: Only One God Has Any Real Power

The following is an excerpt from Douglas Stuart's Exodus commentary (NAC) discussing the theology of Exodus.

The Egyptians, like virtually all ancients, were polytheists, pantheists, and syncretists. That is, they believed in many different gods, that all aspects of nature partook of the divine and were in some sense coterminous with it, and that exclusivism in religion was foolish—the wise person tried to understand and benefit from all the worship he could manage of as many gods as he could get to know.

The Israelites in Egypt at the time of the exodus had lived in this sort of cultural milieu for more than four centuries. From a human point of view it would seem virtually impossible that they could fully break free of such a powerful, long-term enculturation and come to believe in and serve only one true God, and certainly it would seem impossible that such a conversion could be accomplished quickly. Yet that is exactly what the only God had in mind for his chosen people: to show them that all other gods were false and that he alone was true and held in himself all the power they had been attributing to the various gods and goddesses of their mythopoeic belief system. It was his plan that they should see his absolute sovereignty so visibly that they would be able to convert to the truth, leave Egypt, and become his covenant people at Sinai—all in the space of a few months. He planned to show them that the gods of Egypt were empty nothings.

By definition, gods are supposed to be powerful. Gods are worshiped precisely because they have power. A powerless god would be, in fact, no god at all. Why would anyone even bother to learn about, tell about, pray to, or otherwise honor a being who had no effect on anything? Among the ancients, certainly, there was no interest in ineffective gods, no theoretical interest in the doings of feckless existences. Therefore, if a believed-in god, a supposed deity, could be shown powerless not just in some area tangential to his or her reputed main strength but in the very realm where he or she was considered the power among all the powers of the universe, it would swiftly undermine belief in that god or goddess.

That is exactly what the only true God, Yahweh, does in the book of Exodus. Easily, comprehensively, impressively, dramatically, publicly, decisively—he demonstrates his total control over all aspects of the physical world that were thought by the Egyptians to be the province of “the gods of Egypt.” He shows that the supposed gods of the Nile, or the sun, or the wind, or of various other parts or players in the world have no strength, no will, no effectiveness of any kind. Their power was illusory. They couldn’t even help the Egyptians prevail against well-subjugated slaves; they couldn’t control the phenomena of nature that they were supposed to be coterminous with and supposed to inhabit uniquely through their pantheistic divinity.

In this regard, as part of their religion, the Egyptians maintained a superior view of themselves and their land. They hated foreigners. They considered themselves the greatest of all peoples and their country the greatest place on the earth. Some of that was natural; even today

most people tend to be patriotic, loving what is familiar politically and geographically and identifying with their own neighbors and countrymen. The Egyptians went beyond this. They considered that no place on earth had the advantages of the united Upper and Lower Egypt and that this was the result of nothing less than the combined favor of the gods upon them. They had the best and the most powerful gods, who had long loved Egypt above other places, and their religious faithfulness to these gods had long been paying off, they thought, in the superior prosperity, military might, and culture that Egypt enjoyed.

Yahweh, a God previously unknown to the Egyptians, overturned all that. By the time the plagues were completed, the Egyptians—including Pharaoh himself—were begging the Israelites to leave Egypt. Their gods had failed miserably in the face of the only real power in Egypt: the God of the Hebrews, who had sent his servant Moses to announce his demands for the deliverance of his people to him. Thereafter, this Yahweh brought his people to Mount Sinai, where he graciously gave them a covenant relationship with himself and promised them his dwelling in their very midst. No other god surfaces in Exodus. Even the golden young bull of chap. 32 is a depiction, however distorted and foolish, of the one who delivered the Israelites from Egypt, that is, Yahweh. The book closes with a description of the way God reminded the Israelites by day and by night of his glory (40:35-38). No non-gods, Egyptian or otherwise, could share it.