

waters were a wall to them.¹²”

As it is written,

Lord is his Name! Pharaoh’s chariots and his army . . . the deeps covered them . . . And with the blast of thy nostrils the waters were piled up; The floods stood straight like a wall.¹³

Or as *The New York Times* wrote about the Krakatoa tsunami, “Far out to seaward a piled-up wall of water, standing like a high column and coming in upon the shore with inconceivable swiftness.¹⁴”

The plagues

These are the ten plagues which the Most Holy, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt:

Spill a drop of wine for each plague:

Blood, Frogs, Vermin, Wild Beasts, Pestilence, Boils, Hail, Locusts, Darkness, Slaying of the first-born.

Some of these plagues resulting from the Thera explosion are detailed in the written records of Egypt in 1628 BC. But where were our ancestors, the Israelites? The Exodus of the Jews “was supposed to have taken place in Egypt, yet Egyptian sources knew it not. . . . The effect on Egypt must have been cataclysmic—loss

¹²Pellegrino, page 238.

¹³Exodus 15, from Pellegrino p. 236.

¹⁴*The New York Times*, October 22, 1883, quoted by Pellegrino p. 236.

on the “sea of reeds” at the headwaters of the Nile, and imagine it thus:

Its first breath is felt as a sudden retreat of the water, plunging over a matter of minutes deeper than any tide can ebb. [Pharaoh’s] sentries could not have known what has happening to them Because they did not know what they were seeing, there was no cause for fear, only astonishment and curiosity, even joy at whatever miracle was turning the seabed into dry land. Mud dunes that had lain under thirty feet of water were suddenly climbing into open air. In the spaces between the dunes, puddles glistened. Fish thrashed in them. On a tidal plain such as the Sea of Reeds, the Mediterranean would have drained a half mile out, making hissing and sucking noises as it went. Driven by wonder and curiosity, [Pharaoh’s] sentries must have followed the retreating coastline, perhaps even pausing to drag prized fish from the puddles. Then the sucking noises abruptly ceased, and a new sound was in the air When the sea returned—faster than any charioteer could hope to flee—it was forty feet above the high-tide mark. As told in Exodus 14, “And the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind . . . and the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen . . . and the

of a servile population, pillaging of gold and silver, destruction of an army—yet at no point in the history of the country . . . is there the slightest hint of the traumatic impact [the Exodus] would have had on nomics or society.¹⁵

Six hundred to a thousand years later, when the Hebrews became literate, Exodus was written, combining fragments of oral tradition from Canaan and Egypt. For an accurate chronology, should we believe the records of the Egyptians, written at the time of the events; an oral tradition the Israelites wrote down centuries later? There may have been plagues, and even unusual events in the Reed Sea. There had certainly been Semitic peoples in Egypt. But there is no evidence of the Hebrews in Egypt, nor of their sudden departure.

An Egyptian list from 1500 BC describes nomadic tribes living to the East; and in the region of Edom there is a name – – “*Yhw* in the land of the [nomads]. . . . It has been generally admitted that we have here the tetragrammaton, the name of the Israelite god, YHWH . . . a most precious indication of the whereabouts of an enclave revering this god.¹⁶”

By 1000 BC there began to be Israelites who leave an archaeological trace. They settled in Canaan, either conquering the other Canaanites or intermingling with them and converting them to the monotheistic religion. By 600 BC the Israelites ruled much of Canaan, but in 587 Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians, and the Jews were exiled, taken as slaves to Babylon.

¹⁵Redford, p.408.
¹⁶Ibid., p. 272.

the gloomy depths of Tartarus – the sharp vibration . . . forming a solid roll of sacred fire. Fertile tracts of land all around cracked as they burned, and immense forests roared in the fire. The whole Earth and the ocean and the barren sea began to boil.⁷

Fifty cubic miles of mountain were hurled into the atmosphere as incandescent volcanic ash. One hundred twenty miles away the ash layer is two feet thick. For days it was dark; and even the next summer, no summer came. Written records from the Imperial court in China, tree rings in California, show the summer of 1627 to be unusually cold.

As it is written in Exodus,

And all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings . . . and the mountain smoking.⁸ And there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days: they saw not one another, neither rose any from his palace for three days.⁹ And there was blood throughout the land of Egypt.¹⁰ And there remained no green thing in the trees, or in the plants of the field, through all the land.¹¹

Scientists can calculate the effect of the Thera tsunami

⁷Hesiod, *Theogony*, ca. 700s BC, as quoted in Pellegrino, page 212.

⁸Exodus 20:14-15
⁹Exodus 10:22-23
¹⁰7:21-22
¹¹Exodus 10:15

Archaeologists can examine the Exodus story itself to learn what its author knew of Egypt. The author of Exodus “had no information earlier than the Saite period (sixth to seventh centuries BC). The eastern [Nile] Delta and Sinai he describes are those of 26th Dynasty kings and early Persian overlords . . . He cannot locate the Egyptian court to anything but the largest and most famous city in his own day in the northeastern Delta, namely Tanis, the royal residence from about 1070 to 725 BC. . . . In short, with respect to the geography of the Exodus, the post-Exilic compiler of the present Biblical version had no genuinely ancient details.”¹⁷

The haroset we eat is a reminder of the bricks that our ancestors made as slaves in the land of Egypt. “But the Egyptians used cut stone, not brick, for their large building projects. Brick *was* a principal building material in Babylon, to which the Jews were exiled after the destruction of the Temple, in 587 BC. Was the Exodus written during the Babylonian captivity?”¹⁸

Sixty years later, around 527 BC, the Jews were free to go from Babylon. But Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote in the first century AD that not all the Jews were eager to leave the Babylonian exile to return to the arid land of Israel. One professor of ancient history speculates that the Book of Exodus was composed by nationalist Jews in Babylon to persuade their people.¹⁹ *This year we are slaves here, but next year we hope to be free men in the land of Israel.*

¹⁷Redford, p. 409–410

¹⁸David Denby, “No Exodus.” *The New Yorker*, December 7, 1998, p. 184.

¹⁹Denby, p. 184.

describe cities in [Canaan], they call them *wnwt*, meaning fortified enclosures.”²

The Pharaohs ruled Egypt for two thousand years, from 3000 to 1000 BC. But for a time, starting about 1800 BC, Semitic tribespeople swarmed west from Canaan across the sands of Sinai and seized control of Egypt.³ The Egyptians called them “foreign rulers,” *hk-h-swt*, or Hyksos.⁴ After four generations, the Egyptians overthrew their foreign oppressors and put their own oppressors back in charge. After that, a Semitic population lingered in Egypt and a part of it was assigned construction tasks.⁵

In the autumn of 1628 BC the volcanic island of Thera in the Aegean sea exploded.⁶ The blast was up to fifty times more violent than the explosion of Krakatoa in the Pacific ocean 3500 years later – and the Krakatoa blast killed thirty thousand people in tidal waves as far away as 2000 miles. As it is written in the earliest Greek poem that has survived to the present time, written down 1000 years after the Thera explosion and 200 years before Exodus was written,

The limitless expanse of the sea echoed
terribly; the Earth rumbled loudly, and the
broad area of the sky shook and groaned
. . . and a heavy quaking penetrated into

²Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton University Press, 1992; page 11.

³Charles Pellegrino, *Return to Sodom and Gomorrah*, Random House, 1994; page 27.

⁴Redford, p. 100.

⁵Redford, p. 408.

⁶Pellegrino, p. 212.

The Four More Questions

1. Did any of this really happen?

2. Were our ancestors slaves in the land of Egypt?
3. When did our ancestors start worshipping God?
4. Who was Moses?

The long answers

Five thousand years ago, the people of the land of Egypt were the first in the world to learn agriculture and writing. Within two or three hundred years they built pyramids and established a civilization with continuous written records, carved into stone and baked into clay. Today, archaeologists unearth the buildings and read the writings, and know much of the history of Egypt.

Two hundred miles to the East, across the Sinai desert, was the land of Canaan. The Canaanites did not have writing until much later. Archaeologists cannot read their history so easily, because they built few cities and left no written records. As it is written, “when after 3000 BC¹ Egyptian sources are obliged to

¹And the *glatt kosher* way to write this date is 760 in the Jewish calendar. And the kosher euphemism when writing for the secular world is 3000 B.C.E., standing for “before the common era,” instead of 3000 BC, standing for “before you-know-who.” But whom are we kidding with this B.C.E. stuff?

Drink the second cup of wine.

The Three More Answers

1. *Did any of this really happen?* Yes, some of these things may have happened, though not necessarily to the Jews; perhaps to someone else. When in 1000 BC the Hebrews came down from their nomadic life in the hills of Edom to live among the settled towns of the Canaanites, they may have adopted many of the oral traditions of the Canaanites – the memory that hundreds of years before a Semitic people had ruled Egypt for a time before being expelled; the story of an ash cloud that darkened the sky for days; the story of the water receding from the Reed Sea, then rushing back; the memory of a great man named Jacob. Then as the Jews became a literate people they imported literary forms from Egypt. Only after that, in and after the Babylonian exile, did they write down the definitive book of their own religion.

2. *Were our ancestors really slaves in the land of Egypt?* Probably not. But they were slaves in the land of Babylon.

3. *When did our ancestors start worshipping God?* At least three thousand five hundred years ago.

4. *Who was Moses?* “Moses is tied to four major traditions: the Exodus itself, the law-giving at Mount Sinai, the wandering in the wilderness,

and the initial stages of the conquest [of Canaan]. The question as to which of these traditions did Moses originally belong, if not to all, is one that has bedeviled scholarship for decades.²⁰ “The more one looks for Moses, or even *at* Moses, the farther away he seems, and the search grows rather bruising.”²¹

Washing the hands

Baruch a-taw Adonai Elohaynu melech ha-olum asher kid-d’shaw-nu b’mitz-vo-sawv v’tzee-vaw-nu al n’tee-las yaw-daw-yeem. Blessed art Thou, O Eternal, our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with Thy commandments and commanded us to wash the hands.

Blessings over the Matzah

Take the two whole matzahs and the broken one and say the following blessings:

Baruch a-taw Adonai Eluhaynu melech ha-olum ha-mo-tzee le-chem meen ha-aretz. Blessed art Thou, O Eternal, our God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

Baruch a-taw Adonai Eluhaynu melech ha-olum asher kid-d’shaw-nu b’mitz-vo-sawv v’tzee-vaw-nu al a-chee-las matzah. Blessed art Thou, O Eternal, our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with Thy commandments and commanded us to eat matzah.

²⁰Redford, page 417.

²¹Denby, page 180.

The Four Questions

1. On all other nights, we may eat either bread or matzah; why on this night may we eat only matzah?
2. On all other nights, we may eat any kind of herbs; why on this night may we eat only bitter herbs?
3. On all other nights, we don’t dip the herbs; why on this night do we dip the herbs twice?
4. On all other nights, we eat sitting up; why on this night do we recline?

The short answers

1. When our ancestors had to flee the land of Egypt, there was no time for the dough to rise, so they had to bake the unleavened dough.
2. The bitter herbs remind us of the bitter life our ancestors led as slaves of the Pharaoh in Egypt.
3. The salt water reminds us of the tears our ancestors shed in Egypt.
4. We recline because we are not slaves, as our ancestors were in the land of Egypt; as free people we may choose to recline.

Kiddush

Fill the first glass of wine.

Baruch a-taw Adonai Elohaynu melech ha-olum
boray p'ree ha-gafen. Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God,
King of the Universe, Creator of the Fruit of the vine.

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the
Universe, who hast preserved us alive, provided for us,
and brought us to enjoy this season.

*Drink the wine in a reclining position.
Wash your hands.*

Karpas

Dip a piece of parsley in salt water.

Baruch a-taw Adonai Elohaynu melech ha-olum
boray p'ree ha-a-daw-maw. Blessed art Thou, O Eter-
nal, our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruits of
the earth.

Break the Middle Matzah

This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate
in the land of Egypt; let all those who are hungry, enter
and eat thereof; and all who are in distress, come and
celebrate the Passover. This year we celebrate here, but
next year we hope to celebrate it in the land of Israel.
This year we are slaves here, but next year we hope to
be free men in the land of Israel.

3

Bitter Herbs

Take some bitter herbs, dip them into the charoses and

say:

Baruch a-taw Adonai Elohaynu melech ha-olum a-
sher kid-d'shaw-nu b'mitz-vo-sawv v'tzee-vaw-nu al
a-chee-las maror. Blessed art Thou, O Eternal, our God,
King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with Thy com-
mandments and commanded us to eat bitter herbs.

Korech

*Break the bottom matzah and distribute it with some
bitter herbs dipped in charoses, then say:*

Thus did Hillel during the existence of the holy
Temple: he took unleavened bread and bitter herbs,
and at them together, in order to perform the Law,
"With matzah and maror shall they eat it."

The Festive Meal

Nu, eat already!

The Afikomen

*Find the afikomen, and distribute pieces of it for all
to eat. After this no food may be eaten during the
evening.*

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The Archeologist's Haggadah

Andrew W. Appel

