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**TITLE** "The Rabbinic Treatment of the Biblical Pharaoh"

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THE RABBINIC TREATMENT OF THE BIBLICAL PHARAOH

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## DIGEST

The Bible identifies seven distinct Pharaohs, but the coverage of these rulers is by no means equally distributed. The treatment devoted to the two Pharaohs who ruled during Israel's bondage in Egypt far exceeds the references made to the other Pharaohs.

This sense of emphasis and priority is essentially echoed in the early rabbinic literature, specifically the Talmud and the classical midrashim. One noteworthy difference does exist between the Biblical and rabbinic discussions. This is the prominent though not unanimous position among the rabbis which amalgamates into one personality the two Biblical Pharaohs who ruled during the period of Israel's enslavement in Egypt.

It is the rabbinic treatment of this composite figure which provides the focus for this thesis. In chapter one references are cited which demonstrate the rabbinic reworking of the Biblical presentation of a multiplicity of Pharaohs. The remainder of the thesis examines systematically the rabbinic treatment of Pharaoh's transgressions and subsequent punishment.

The discussion of the transgressions which Pharaoh committed (chapter two) is divided into two parts: "Pharaoh's crimes against humanity" (i.e., Pharaoh's immoral sexual behavior, Pharaoh's persecution and maltreatment of the Israelite people, and Pharaoh's disregard for human life) and "Pharaoh's crimes against God" (i.e., Pharaoh's nonrecognition of the Hebrew God and his own self-proclaimed godhood, Pharaoh's

disdain for God's miracles as performed by Moses and Aaron, and Pharaoh's disdain for Moses - God's representative - as manifested by the king's attempts on Moses' life).

The discussion of the punishment of Pharaoh (chapter three) is also divided into two parts: "Preliminary Afflictions" (i.e., the punishments incurred up to and including the ninth plague) and "Final Retribution" (i.e., the slaying of the first-born Egyptian and the drowning of the Egyptian people at the Reed Sea).

In the concluding chapter an attempt is made to analyze the assembled midrashim. First, the rabbinic comments are evaluated in terms of their similarity with and divergence from the Biblical portrait of Pharaoh. Second, an effort is made to explain some of these divergences in light of the contemporary issues which the rabbis faced in their own day. Finally, the divergences with the rabbinic literature are themselves noted and subsequently analyzed.



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## INTRODUCTION

The year 1978 may be remembered in the art world as the year of King Tut. Culminating in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City, the Treasures of Tutankhamun exhibit has been greeted by capacity crowd reception in museums across this country. Special television broadcasts further expanded Tut's audience. Newspapers and magazines joined force too to make the exhibit a media event. What is ironic about all of this is that Tutankhamun "hardly got this kind of attention when he was alive."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the exhibit bears testimony to the richness and highly advanced culture of the ancient Egyptian civilization.

If one were to look beyond the material objects and architectural feats of ancient Egypt to the Biblical and rabbinic portraits of the ancient Pharaohs, then another component of the picture emerges. From the perspective of the Biblical writers and the later rabbinic commentators Egypt was not a model of an advanced culture, but, rather, was the example of one that that was depraved, a civilization committed to immorality and injustice. Moreover, this wickedness was exemplified in the person of the ancient Pharaoh.

The Bible identifies seven distinct Pharaohs. Of these only two are known by name. They are Pharaoh Neco (ca. Josiah, 2 K 23:28) and Pharaoh Hophra (ca. Jeremiah, Jer. 44:30). The other Egyptian rulers mentioned in the Bible are referred to by title only. One reigned in the days of Abraham (Gen. 12:10f), another ruled in the days of Joseph (Gen. 39f), and a third and

fourth ruled successively during the period of Israel's bondage in Egypt (Ex. 1:8, 2:23). Finally, one other Pharaoh is mentioned as a contemporary of Solomon (1 K 3:1). The Bible recognizes an eighth ruler of Egypt - King Shishak - but never refers to him as Pharaoh (1 K 14:25).

The Biblical coverage of these rulers is by no means equally distributed. The treatment devoted to the two Pharaohs who ruled during Israel's bondage in Egypt far exceeds the references made to the other Pharaohs. Except for the ruler who befriended Joseph, the other Pharaohs pass out of Biblical history with virtual anonymity.

This sense of emphasis and priority is essentially echoed in the early rabbinic literature, specifically the Talmud and the classical midrashim. However, one noteworthy difference between the rabbinic and Biblical discussions will be demonstrated in chapter one. Though there are rabbis who do not subscribe to this position, this is the prominent view that the two Biblical Pharaohs who ruled during the period of Israel's bondage in Egypt are amalgamated into one personality in the rabbinic literature.

It is the rabbinic treatment of this composite figure which provides the focus for this thesis. From the rabbinic perspective this Egyptian ruler is, for all intents and purposes, the Biblical Pharaoh. All the same, rabbinic comments regarding the other Biblical Pharaohs do exist and will be integrated into the text of the thesis when relevant.

Though the research for this work was restricted to the

classic rabbinic literature, one further observation regarding contemporary attitudes in our own day is instructive. This is that our current bias has changed little from that of the rabbis. In the process of writing the thesis there were many occasions to mention the topic to others. Invariably, one consistent response was evoked. This is the ready association we make with the general title "Pharaoh" and the particular ruler who refused to release the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt.

Current publicity notwithstanding, the image of Tutankhamun is not as readily brought to mind, but perhaps this should be expected. Tut endures only through the medium of a museum exhibit. Tut is encountered from a distance over an expanse of time and then only through a guarded display of objects. As for the Pharaoh who enslaved the Hebrews, he survives permanently in the collective memories of those Hebrews and their descendants. Time need not be traversed to meet this Pharaoh because his presence is experienced with immediacy. The wickedness of this evil ruler is seared into our very souls.

Annually at the Passover meal when we Jews read from the Haggadah of the Hebrew bondage and exodus from Egypt we relive for ourselves that same deliverance from servitude. Still today we continue to know this Pharaoh directly through a history that is relived personally by Jews and other persecuted peoples. Would that it were otherwise, but the time has not yet come to forget.

## PROCEDURE

The initial task of this thesis was to compile a list of all the pertinent references on the subject. To this end, Louis Ginzberg's The Legends of the Jews proved invaluable because of the detailed notes it contains. The indices of the Soncino Talmud and the Soncino Midrash Rabbah were also of help in pointing to references which Ginzberg overlooked. Finally, Menachem Kasher's Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation was consulted though to a lesser degree than the above mentioned works. The passages in this anthology largely duplicated those mentioned in the other works, but Kasher's notes were often useful in clarifying some of the more obscure references.

Once this list of sources was compiled each citation was researched as carefully as possible. Parallel sources were examined, but in most cases only the earliest version of a reference is quoted in the thesis; in these instances the parallel passages are referred to in the notes.

As the research was completed certain themes emerged which were used as the organizing principles for the chapters of the thesis. In that the rabbinic literature is not arranged topically the design of the thesis is necessarily subjective.

Finally, while the author attempts to bring a degree of originality to the work the analysis of the material largely echoes the views of Moses Aberbach as discussed in his article "Pharaoh" which is found in the Encyclopedia Judaica.



## CHAPTER I

### ONE ONLY PHARAOH

According to the Biblical account, there seem to be three distinct Pharaohs who ruled Egypt during the Hebrews' sojourn in that land. The first of these monarchs was a contemporary of Joseph. During this Pharaoh's reign Joseph became Prime Minister, Jacob and his family descended to Egypt and settled in Goshen, and "the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly ..." (Ex. 1:7) This prosperity came to an end with Joseph's death and the rise of a second Pharaoh: "Now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph." (Ex. 1:8) This is the infamous Pharaoh whose decrees called for the drowning in the Nile of the Hebrew first-born. Moses was raised in this Pharaoh's house, but later, when Pharaoh heard that Moses had killed an Egyptian, the king sought to kill Moses. Consequently, the future leader of the Hebrew people fled to Midian. During that period - while Moses was in exile - several significant events took place. Besides getting a wife, Zipporah, Moses more importantly experienced the theophany at the burning bush and received his summons from God to be His agent in delivering Israel. Then an event occurred which made it possible for Moses to return to Egypt: "In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died." (Ex. 2:23) The time was auspicious for Moses to carry out his mission. Thus God said to Moses, "Go back to Egypt; for all the men who were seeking your life are

dead." (Ex. 4:19) Of course Moses was not destined to accomplish his task without resistance. A third Pharaoh rose to power and opposed Moses in his efforts to rescue the Hebrews. It was during the reign of this latter tyrant that the plagues were enacted and Israel finally escaped Egypt, the House of Bondage.

Biblical scholars have been interested in determining the identities of these three rulers, but, as J. A. Wilson suggests, they "cannot be satisfactorily identified by name or even by century."<sup>1</sup> Still, there is a general consensus among scholars, Wilson included, as to the identity of these three Pharaohs. The king who promoted Joseph is thought to have lived during the period of the Hyksos ascendancy in Egypt (1720-1550 B.C.E.) when "the land was under pro-Semitic rule (and) conditions were favorable for a Hebrew to rise to such a position of leadership."<sup>2</sup> If this conjecture is accurate and if the claim of Ex. 12:40 is likewise truthful, that Israel dwelt in Egypt four hundred and thirty years, then the Exodus can be dated at about 1290 B.C.E. This falls during the reign of Rameses II (1290-1224 B.C.E.). Rameses' predecessor, Moses' original protector and later pursuer, would be Seti I (1308-1290 B.C.E.). Strikingly, if this analysis is correct then Seti I would obviously not have known Joseph as hundreds of years would have elapsed between their periods of prominence. Over and against this view, the Biblical account apparently conflates history in suggesting that Seti I was a successor to the Pharaoh who honored Joseph when this certainly was not



the case.

As for the rabbis, they too were interested in the identities of the Pharaohs who enslaved Israel, but, as will be presently shown, some rabbis did not differentiate between one Pharaoh to the next. To the contrary, there are sources which give the impression that the Pharaoh who lived in Joseph's day was the same Pharaoh who ruled at Moses' birth and later during the Exodus. Indeed, other sources suggest that this one and the same Pharaoh was also in power when Abraham and Sarah sought refuge in Egypt from the famine in Canaan as recorded in Genesis 12.

At the other end of the timeline, we shall see later that while, on the one hand, some rabbinic statements argue for the drowning of Pharaoh in the Reed Sea, an equally prominent view states, on the other hand, that Pharaoh was cast up from the waters and subsequently installed in the entrance of Gehenna where he is still alive bearing witness to God's mighty deeds.<sup>4</sup> A variation on this scenario has Pharaoh installed as the king of Nineveh.<sup>5</sup> In either case, the rabbinic picture of one continuous Pharaoh diverges greatly from the Biblical account and the research of Biblical scholars who recognize a series of independent and distinctly unique Egyptian rulers.

How did the rabbis accomplish their reconstruction of the Biblical account? After all, the very prooftexts which Biblical scholars use to delineate several Pharaohs can not be overlooked or casually dismissed by the rabbis. These crucial passages, alluded to earlier, are the following: "Now there

arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Ex. 1:8); and "In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died." (Ex. 2:23) Taken literally, these expressions seem to preclude a revision of history. The key, however, is precisely in knowing how to read the verses so as to derive an alternative meaning from them. In other words, these verses are only ostensibly problematic. As will be made clear, the rabbis were not restricted by the Biblical text; to the contrary, they considered the verses still open to interpretation, specifically their own. What follows presently is an examination of the rabbinic treatment of the two key Biblical passages which, when reworked, yield a unified picture of one continuous Pharaoh.

"Now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph." (Ex. 1:8)

This verse may be read two ways depending on one's interpretation of the word "new." Taken one way, two kings are implied: the former one and the present, "new" one. But read differently only one person might be assumed: the present and still ruling monarch, who, by virtue of certain changes or circumstances, has become a "new" kind of king, a changed Pharaoh, "new", that is, in personality and in his attitude towards the Hebrews. This latter view, which denies a multiplicity of kings, is expressed in the midrash:

"Now there arose a new king over Egypt." (Ex. 1:8)  
Was this not Pharaoh (i.e. the same one)? For when the Egyptians said to Pharaoh, 'Come and let us attack this nation,' he replied, 'Idiots that you are! Until now we have been eating of their provision; how

can we think of attacking them? Were it not for Joseph we would not be alive.' Since he would not hearken to them, they deposed him from his throne for three months until he promised them, 'I will agree to all you desire,' whereupon they restored him. Hence it is written, "Now there arose a new king."<sup>6</sup>

In other words, Pharaoh was "new" by virtue of his reinstatement to power.

This also explains why Pharaoh did not know Joseph (Ex.1:8): by virtue of Pharaoh's redefined orientation to the Hebrews "he was (really) like one who did not know Joseph at all."<sup>7</sup> Actually, he knew Joseph all along. More important, he knew that Egypt survived because of Joseph's presence in their midst. However, by turning his back on Joseph and acceding to the people's request to attack the Hebrews, Pharaoh, for all intents and purposes, denied Joseph's existence. This change of heart explains how it was that a new king arose who knew not Joseph.

Integral to this rabbinic reconstruction of the text is Pharaoh's temporary disenthronement which, quite obviously, is a pure rabbinic fabrication. Some rabbis, however, had recourse to another interpretation of Ex. 1:8 and the word "new" in particular which did not require the deposing of Pharaoh, yet still amalgamated a supposed succession of kings into one personality. The following two midrashim, slight variations on each other, express this alternative analysis of the Biblical text:

When the Egyptians saw that the Hebrews multiplied so abundantly they issued new decrees upon them, as it says, "The king legislated anew" (lit. "Now

there arose a new king"); not that he was new, but that he enacted new decrees of punishment over them.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly:

"They have dealt faithlessly with the Lord; for they have borne alien children. Now the new moon will devour them with their fields." (Hosea 5:7) "A new king arose in Egypt" - When Joseph died the Hebrews disregarded the ritual of brit milah (circumcision) and said, 'Let us be like Egyptians.' When the Holy One blessed be He saw this He cancelled all the love with which He had loved them (i.e., with which He caused the Egyptians to love them), as it says, "He turned their hearts to hate His people, to deal craftily with His servants." (Ps. 105:25) - "Now the new moon will devour them." It is written chadash, new. "A new king arose." (It likewise is written chadash, new. Further, just as the moon which is "new" is not really new, but is the same one, so too, the king who is "new" is not literally new, but is the same one. Thus, "a new king arose" means that) the king enacted new, harsh decrees upon the people.<sup>9</sup>

To sum up so far, whether Pharaoh was deposed or issued new decrees, the message is still the same. In either case, the rabbis perceive one and only one Pharaoh in the Biblical text.

"In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died."  
(Ex. 2:23)

At first glance this verse, like Ex. 1:8, poses a direct challenge to the rabbinic one-Pharaoh hypothesis. Clearly, if the king truly died and was then followed by a successor, then obviously more than one Pharaoh ruled over Israel. This conclusion, however, requires a literal reading of the text. The rabbis, on the other hand, were not unaware of the apparent difficulty of this verse, but they offer an alternative explanation. The rabbinic analysis, according to a midrash, is that Pharaoh did not in fact die. Rather, "he became a leper,

who is deemed as one who is dead, as Scripture said, 'Let her not, I pray, be as one dead.' (Num. 12:12) ..."<sup>10</sup> Pharaoh is compared here to Moses' sister Miriam who, when leprous, was considered dead.

Curiously, this is not the first instance, at least according to the rabbis, of a Pharaoh being afflicted with leprosy. The Pharaoh in the days of Abraham and Sarah was likewise stricken with this punishment:

"This shall be the law of the leper." (Lev. 14:2) This is alluded to in what is written, "There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to Him." (Prov. 6:16) ... This seventh one is the worst of all. And which is this? - "He that sows discord among his brethren." (Prov. 6:19) ... R. Johanan said. 'All (these seven) are punished by leprosy.' ... "And he that sows discord among his brethren." (How do we know that God hates this?) - From the case of Pharaoh who (almost) brought discord between Abraham and Sarah. And how do we know that he was smitten with leprosy? - From "And the Lord plagued Pharaoh." (Gen. 12:17)<sup>11</sup>

This coincidence - the common affliction of the two Pharaohs - is perhaps only accidental. On the other hand, and this can only be suggested and not proven, the coincidence is very likely a result of an association of these two Pharaohs into one, sole personality. Consequently, it is no wonder that Moses' Pharaoh and Abraham and Sarah's Pharaoh should be afflicted with the same illness. if, after all, they are treated as one and the same person. The confusion is easily unraveled with a rabbinical rendering of Scripture: the Pharaoh who "died" (Ex. 2:23) really suffered from leprosy, a disease he contracted because of his immoral sexual advance towards "Sarah, Abram's wife." (Gen. 12:17)



## CONCLUSION

As has been demonstrated, the rabbis did not discern, or, if they did, then at least they did not acknowledge the same multiplicity of Pharaohs in the Biblical text that modern scholars detect. For the rabbis there is only an illusion of different Pharaohs. For example, there seemed to be a "new king", but in fact this was really the case of the old one being reinstated. Alternatively, what was new was not Pharaoh, but rather his decrees. Similarly, Pharaoh appeared not to know Joseph, but really did. Likewise, Pharaoh appeared to be dead, but really was not.

The above views are prominent among the rabbis, but they are not held by all the commentators. To be sure, it is true that some rabbis were of the opinion that melech chadash ("new king") really referred to a new king.<sup>12</sup> At the other end of the time spectrum, there are some rabbinic passages which assert that Pharaoh did not live on, but rather drowned in the Reed Sea.<sup>13</sup> Of interest is, however, the prominent rabbinic view which in face of specific Biblical references to the contrary insists that there was only one Pharaoh.

In treating Pharaoh this way - as one personality - the rabbis remove Pharaoh from a specific historical setting. In a strict sense, they actually take Pharaoh out of the realm of history altogether. In so doing, Pharaoh becomes a timeless symbol, an archetype of the eternal enemy.

This transformation is perhaps typical of the rabbinic method. The temporal constraints of the Biblical chronology

are transcended. The Bible, no longer an account confined to a specific time period, is itself made eternal. The sagas and experiences it records repeat themselves in each generation. The Bible too is timeless. It speaks to all ages and all peoples.

## CHAPTER II

### THE TRANSGRESSIONS OF PHARAOH

#### INTRODUCTION

The Biblical appraisal of Pharaoh is decidedly unequivocal and can be summed up tersely: Pharaoh is "the enemy." (Ex. 15:6, 9) Not a trace of goodness can be found in him. Indeed, evil so permeates Pharaoh's being that this "wicked man, the son of a wicked man" perhaps symbolizes the embodiment of sin itself.<sup>1</sup>

The rabbinic picture of Pharaoh both echoes the Biblical one and expands upon it. This elaboration will emerge, hopefully, through an examination of the specific crimes which Pharaoh committed. These have been organized into two broad categories. In the first part of this chapter Pharaoh's crimes against humanity will be considered. The subsequent section will discuss Pharaoh's crimes against God.



## PART 1 - PHARAOH'S CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Pharaoh's crimes against humanity fall under three categories: Pharaoh's immoral sexual behavior, Pharaoh's persecution and maltreatment of the Israelite people, and Pharaoh's disregard for human life, Egyptian and Israelite alike.

### Pharaoh's immoral sexual behavior

Compared to Pharaoh's other crimes, which are treated quite extensively, only a few rabbinic sources mention Pharaoh's sexual licentiousness. Nonetheless, this behavior is alluded to enough to consider it one of Pharaoh's primary sins.

How was this transgression manifested? According to one source, Pharaoh "solicited the midwives for immoral intercourse."<sup>2</sup> This effort, however, was unsuccessful. The midwives refused to yield, as it is written, "but the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them." (Ex. 1:17)

Another source explains that the decision to cast only the Hebrew males into the Nile was motivated by a similar sexual desire:

"And every daughter you shall save alive." (Ex. 1:22) What need did Pharaoh have to save the girls? What they said in fact was, 'Let us kill the males so that we may take unto ourselves the females for wives,' for the Egyptians were steeped in immorality.<sup>3</sup>

As much as Pharaoh lusted after women, he equally was desirous of men. This is demonstrated in the following passage which is a commentary on Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites and his concessions to the Egyptians to join in the chase:

"The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.'" (Ex. 15:9) ... In the past, if you killed any of them I used to hold you responsible by the laws of the government, but now, 'I will draw my sword.' ... Some say: It does not say here 'I shall point my sword' (eh-ten char-bi), but rather 'I shall draw (lit. empty) my sword' (ah-rik char-bi). He meant to commit pederasty with their males. It is the same as in the passage: "And they shall empty their swords against the beauty of Your wisdom" (Ezek. 28:7) where it does not say "And they shall point their swords," but rather "And they shall empty their swords against the beauty of Your wisdom."<sup>4</sup>

This exhausts the references concerning the sexual behavior of the Pharaoh of the Exodus. Not surprising is that the Pharaohs in the time of Joseph and Abraham and Sarah were equally guilty of sexual immorality. The indictment against the Pharaoh in Joseph's day is expressed through an elaboration on Judah's comment to Joseph - "for you are like unto Pharaoh" - which is recorded in Gen. 44:18, namely:

... just as Pharaoh your master loves women and lusts after them, so you beheld in Benjamin that he was goodlooking and coveted him to be your servant.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly:

... just as Pharaoh lusts for males, so do you lust for males.<sup>6</sup>

As for the Pharaoh in Abraham and Sarah's day, there is already a suggestion of misbehavior in the Bible. Gen. 12:15 reads, "and the princes of Pharaoh saw her (Sarah) and praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house." The rabbinic commentary on this verse is all the more explicit:

R.. Berekiah said, 'It was because he dared to come near the shoe of that lady.' (That is, Pharaoh was stricken with plagues because he attempted to have

intercourse with Sarah.) ... And why (was he struck) with such severity? Because she told him, 'I am a married woman,' yet he would not leave her.<sup>7</sup>

### Pharaoh's persecution and maltreatment of the Israelite people

Scripture is quite precise about the Egyptian harshness against the Hebrews. They set taskmasters over them, afflicted them with burdens, and generally made them serve with rigour. (Ex. 1:11-14) The requirement to make the usual quota of bricks, but without the necessary straw is a particularly severe case in point.

For his part, Pharaoh was unrelenting in his treatment of the Hebrews and went as far as rebuking them on the basis of his own example:

"Therefore they set over him taskmasters" (Ex. 1:11) (The Hebrew is ambiguous here. Va-ya-si-mu alav messim literally means "and they set over him taskmasters," but it is usually translated as "they set over them /i.e. Israel/ taskmasters.") - It should have read "over them", ah-ley-hem. It was taught in the School of R. Eleazar b. Shimon: It teaches that they brought a brick-mold (messim) and hung it around Pharaoh's neck (so that when) every Israelite complained to them, 'I am weak,' they said to him, 'Are you weaker than Pharaoh?'<sup>8</sup>

As for the decree to make bricks without the essential straw, that hardship would have been enough in and of itself. Pharaoh, however, made it felt even more acutely:

... at first he induced them to labor with a subtle tongue so that they would make bricks with all their might in order to see what was the maximum they could produce. (Then,) according to the number they produced on the first day it was decreed that they should produce all the rest of their days.<sup>9</sup> (This comment is based on a play of words. Ex. 1:13 literally reads: "And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour /b'pa-rech/." For the purpose of this midrash, however, the verse

is interpreted to mean that the Hebrews were made to serve with subtle tongue /b'peh-rach/.)

Here, too, Pharaoh used his own example to raise the quota:

The king took a basket and a trowel. (Consequently,) which man seeing Pharaoh carrying a basket and a trowel and working among the bricks would not work too? Instantly all Israel went to work eagerly along with him with all their might, they being vigorous and strong men. When dusk fell he appointed taskmasters over them and said to them, 'Reckon up the number of bricks.' Thereupon they rose and counted them. Then he said to them, 'This number you must produce each day.'<sup>10</sup>

Once this decree was enacted Pharaoh then issued a subsequent law which, it was claimed, was designed to look after the welfare of the Hebrews and assist them in fulfilling their quotas. In reality, though, this law was based on an ulterior motive and its enactment only persecuted the Israelites more:

Then he commanded that they should not be allowed to sleep in their homes intending by this to limit their natural increase. He reasoned to himself, 'If they are not allowed to sleep in their homes they will not be able to give birth to children.' Thereupon the taskmasters said to them, 'If you go home to sleep you will lose a few hours each morning from your work when we send for you and you will never complete the allotted number,' as it said, "And the taskmasters were urgent, saying, 'Complete your work ...'" (Ex. 5:13) So they used to sleep on the ground (in the brickyard).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most dastardly as far as the rabbis were concerned - one wonders if this is a cloaked condemnation on their part of a contemporary Roman emperor - Pharaoh, in his relentlessness, revoked the permission he had given earlier to the Hebrews to observe the Sabbath. The initial establishment of the Sabbath was an act of kindness on Pharaoh's part in response to a suggestion of Moses:

"And he (Moses) looked on their burdens." (Ex. 2:11) He saw that they had no rest so he went to Pharaoh and said, 'If one has a slave and does not give him rest one day in the week he dies; similarly, if you will not let your slaves rest one day in the week they will die.' Pharaoh replied, 'Go and do as you say.' (Thereupon) Moses went and fixed for them the Sabbath day of rest.<sup>12</sup>

Pharaoh's change of heart would, however, not last. His evil character ultimately held sway and he reversed his prior position:

"Therefore they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.' Let heavier work be laid upon the men ... and let them not regard (yish-u) lying words." (Ex. 5:8-9; this statement is made by Pharaoh.) (The 'lying words' seem to refer to the idle argument of wanting to go worship their God, but what follows suggests an alternative interpretation.) - This is to teach us that the Israelites possessed scrolls with the contents of which they delighted themselves (mish-ta-sha-in) each Sabbath assuring that God would redeem them. Thus, because they rested on the Sabbath Pharaoh said to them, "Let heavier work be laid upon the men that they may labor at it and let them not regard lying words," i.e. let them not delight or rest on the Sabbath day.<sup>13</sup>

What ostensibly bothered Pharaoh was the Israelite's taking time off from work. One can only hypothesize that at the heart of the matter what really agitated Pharaoh was his more immediate fear that the so-called 'lying words' might indeed be telling the truth. Be this as it may, short of outright murder, which will be discussed in the next section, this denial of Sabbath rest sums up and completes an analysis of Pharaoh's harsh treatment of the Hebrews.

#### Pharaoh's disregard for human life, Egyptian and Israelite alike

Pharaoh's great fear was that the Hebrews would become

great in number, rise up against him, and ultimately leave the land altogether. (Ex. 1:10) Consequently, Pharaoh's harsh decrees were intended to subdue the people and prevent their increasing.<sup>14</sup> These actions, needless to say, were to no avail: "the more they afflicted them the more they multiplied and spread across the land." (Ex. 1:12)

Because Pharaoh's efforts were futile he resorted next to graver measures. He was determined to preserve his authority even if this required outright murder. It seems that for Pharaoh the ends justified the means.

The first plan Pharaoh embarked on was at the recommendation of his advisors.<sup>15</sup> The scheme was for the midwives to kill the male Hebrew children immediately at their birth. (Ex. 1:15-21) This way no one would be personally responsible for the deaths:

Why did he command to kill them at the hand of the midwives? So that God should not demand the penalty from them.<sup>16</sup>

The reasoning here is obscure. It is not exactly clear why God could not "demand the penalty from them." Perhaps the logic is that God would be fooled into thinking that a murder had not been committed. The midwives would kill the child at the exact moment of birth. This would then give the appearance that the child was born dead and consequently no crime would have been committed. To kill the child earlier would endanger the mother's life; to kill the child after birth, however, would be considered murder.

In any case, regardless of whether or not this explana-



tion clears up this midrash, this ingenious plan to kill the Hebrew babies was still problematic. How, after all, were the midwives to know prior to birth whether a newborn infant would be a male or a female? According to the midrash the midwives did indeed raise this question, but Pharaoh was ready with the appropriate response:

R. Hanina said that he gave them a great sign: 'If its face is turned downward, then know that it is a male because he is looking through his mother at the earth from which he was created; but if its face is turned upward, then it is a female because it is looking at the source of its creation, the rib, as it said, "And He took one his ribs." (Gen. 2:21)'<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, despite these well-designed plans "the midwives feared God and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men-children alive." (Ex. 1:17) This defeat, however, did not discourage Pharaoh. The king was not beaten yet. Far from giving up, Pharaoh tried one other ploy to kill the Hebrew sons. This of course was the plan to cast all the newborn male children into the Nile.

This plan was as equally ingenious as the former one. Pharaoh's advisors were aware that God exacts punishment according to the principle of measure for measure. Consequently, in an effort to outwit God they took this fact into account in planning their own strategy. The advisors reasoned that if they would afflict Israel with water - by throwing the children into the Nile - that God would not be able to retaliate since He had said, "As I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth." (Isa. 54:9) Unfortunately for the advisors, but fortunately for the Hebrews, this deduction was of course

erroneous:

... they were unaware, however, that He would not bring a flood upon the whole world, but upon one people He would bring it; or, alternatively, He would not bring (the flood) but they would go and fall into it. Thus it says, "And the Egyptians fled towards it (i.e. the sea)." (Ex. 14:27)<sup>18</sup>

This passage speaks only of the punishment Egypt would receive in the future. In the meanwhile, Pharaoh approved the advice of his counselors. In addition, he welcomed their practical suggestions in carrying out this plot:

... They said to him, 'Appoint watch-men over all the pregnant women in the land of Egypt. They should search far and wide and examine each pregnant woman and write down her name on their lists and after nine months they will examine them and you will decree that they should cast all the newborn into the river ...'<sup>19</sup>

Still, despite this well-conceived plan it too was destined to fail not only in the end - with the drowning of the Egyptians - but in the short run as well. That the plot was carried out, but quickly abandoned will be demonstrated later.

For the moment there are two other instances to be examined which illustrate that Pharaoh is guilty of murder. The first of these episodes was Pharaoh's barbaric response to those Hebrews who were unable to do their share of the work:

He said, '(As for) everyone who does not complete his quota of bricks, let them build them into the building beneath the row of bricks.'<sup>20</sup>

Such a fate is not easily surpassed in tragic suffering. Not much more can be worse than being buried alive. However, the other case of murders perpetrated by Pharaoh, though perhaps less severe, was equally depraved.



This instance of murder involved Pharaoh's treatment of his leprosy affliction which was mentioned earlier. Once again heeding the advice of his counselors, Pharaoh required that one hundred and fifty Hebrew children be slayed in the evening and another one hundred and fifty in the morning. This was so that he could bathe in their blood twice daily and thereby be cured. Fortunately for the Hebrews, the cries of the dying children came up to God, He heard their groaning, and remembered His covenant with their forefathers. (Ex. 2: 23-24) Thus, said the sages, "a miracle was wrought for them and Pharaoh was healed of his leprosy."<sup>21</sup>

This case, like the other ones examined so far, involved the innocent murder of the Hebrews only. Certainly they were Pharaoh's principle target. We would be remiss, however, in closing, not to point out that the Egyptians were not exempt from Pharaoh's plotting either. As one rabbi said, "even upon his own people did he (Pharaoh) impose the decree."<sup>22</sup> This assertion, made in reference to the casting of the sons into the river, is easily derived from the Biblical text:

"Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, 'Every son that is born you shall cast into the river ...'" (Ex. 1:22) - 'Of Israel' (i.e., every son of Israel) is not written here, rather, 'every son that is born' whether Egyptian or Israelite 'you shall cast into the Nile.'<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the Egyptians too, though certainly not Pharaoh's principal target, were also his victims.

Finally, whether for sexual misdemeanor, physical brutality, or outright murder, Pharaoh stands thoroughly accused of

crimes against humanity. But this is only one part of his criminal record. The next section examines Pharaoh's even more presumptuous crimes against God.

## PART 2 - PHARAOH'S CRIMES AGAINST GOD

All of the crimes which Pharaoh committed against humanity in general and Israel in particular were ultimately crimes against God. Indirectly, God was still involved:

You (God) have shown Yourself exceedingly great against those that rose up against You. And who are they that rose up against You? They that rose up against Your children, that is, Pharaoh and all his hosts, for it says, "And he took six hundred chosen chariots ..." (Ex. 14:7)<sup>24</sup>

In other words, God was smitten when Israel was smitten.

At the same time, God was also a direct victim of Pharaoh's transgressions. In certain instances Pharaoh's crimes were specifically against God. These cases can be divided into three categories: Pharaoh's nonrecognition of the Hebrew God and his own self-proclaimed godhood; Pharaoh's disdain for God's miracles as performed by Moses and Aaron; and finally, Pharaoh's disdain for Moses - God's representative - as manifested by the king's attempts on Moses' life.

### Pharaoh's nonrecognition of the Hebrew God and his own self-proclaimed godhood

The story is well known. Moses and Aaron are sent by God to Pharaoh to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt. The two Hebrews come to the king and say to him, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may hold a feast unto Me in the wilderness.'" (Ex. 5:1) Pharaoh, of course, is unwilling to grant this request. With barely a pause Pharaoh responds, "Who is the Lord that I should hearken unto His voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, and

moreover I will not let Israel go." (Ex. 5:2)

Pharaoh's attitude towards the Hebrew God is established immediately. There can be no debate about Pharaoh's nonrecognition of God. The rabbinic literature remains consistent with this view. The difference is, however, in the rabbinic elaboration of this incident:

R. Hiyya b. Abba said: That day was Pharaoh's day for the reception of ambassadors. All the kings came and crowned him that he might be Cosmocrator (title for Roman Emperor), Lord of the World. After they had crowned him, Moses and Aaron were still standing at the door of Pharaoh's palace. His servants came and said, 'Two elders are at the gate.' The reply was, 'Let them enter.' When they entered he looked at them as if expecting that they wished to crown him or give him their credentials, but they did not even greet him. He said to them, 'Who are you?' They replied, 'We are the ambassadors of the Lord, blessed be He.' 'What do you want?' he asked. They replied, 'Thus says the Lord, "Let My people go, etc."' Then Pharaoh became very angry and said, "'Who is the Lord, that I should hearken to His voice to let Israel go?" Has he not the sense to send me a crown that you come to me with mere words?'<sup>25</sup>

Pharaoh was insulted that Moses and Aaron did not come bearing gifts. In his eyes this reflected poorly on the God who sent them.

This may state the obvious, but it is an important observation. Up to this point, Pharaoh was only critical of Moses and Aaron's God; he was not ready yet to deny His existence altogether. As the story unfolds, however, Pharaoh's patience gradually runs out:

... He said to them, 'Tarry awhile until I search my records.' So he went into his palace chamber and scrutinized every nation and its gods beginning with the gods of Moab, Ammon, and Zidon. He then said to them, 'I have searched for His name

throughout my archives, but have not found Him.'  
(Thus, "I know not the Lord ..." /Ex. 5:2/)<sup>26</sup>

Pharaoh's research clearly confirmed his initial suspicions. Now he was ready to deny God's existence once and for all. Moses and Aaron were not prepared, however, to accept this response without an argument. Their approach was to prove wrong the logic of Pharaoh's conclusions:

R. Levi said: Pharaoh was like a priest's slave who was an idiot. The priest having gone abroad, the slave looked for him in the cemetery and cried unto the people who were there, 'Have you seen my master here?' The people said to him, 'Is not your master a priest?' He replied, 'Yes.' They said, 'Idiot! Who has ever seen a priest in a cemetery?' (A priest may not defile himself by contact with the dead. See Lev. 21:1) Thus did Moses and Aaron say to Pharaoh, 'Idiot! Is it the way of the dead to be sought for among the living, or are the living among the dead? Our God is living (Jer. 10:10) whereas those you mention are dead. Yes, our God is a living God and an eternal King.'<sup>27</sup>

Pharaoh accepted this rebuttal, but its effectiveness was only temporary. The ensuing discussion between Moses, Aaron, and Pharaoh would be the last in their debate. Perhaps an omen for the Church-controlled disputations of the future, perhaps a comment on such dialogues in the rabbis' own day, Pharaoh, in the end, would have the final say on the matter:

(In response to Moses' statement that the Hebrew God is a living God) Pharaoh said to them, 'Is He young or old? How old is He? How many cities has He captured? How many provinces has He subdued? How long is it since He ascended the throne?' They replied, 'Our God's strength might fill the universe. Before the world was created He existed and He will be when the whole world ends. Moreover, He formed you and has given you the breath of life.' He said to them, 'What deeds did He perform?' They replied, '"He stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth" (Isa. 51:13); His voice "hews out flames of fire"



(Ps. 29:7), "rends the mountains and breaks in pieces the rocks" (1 K. 19:11); His bow is of fire, His arms are flame, His spear is a torch, His shield is the clouds, His sword is lightning (Deut. 32:41); "He forms mountains" (Amos 4:13) and hills and covers the mountains with grass (Ps. 147:8); He brings down rain and dew and causes the plants to grow; He answers those about to give birth; He fashions the child in the womb of its mother and brings it forth into the light of the world; "He removes kings and sets up kings." (Dan. 2:21)' His reply to them was, 'From the very outset you have spoken falsehood for I am the Lord of the Universe and I have created myself and the Nile,' as it says, "My river is my own and I have made it for myself." (Ezek. 29:3)<sup>28</sup>

There was to be no more discussion. Pharaoh would listen no more. His self-proclaimed godhood silences Moses and Aaron and concludes the issue. Pharaoh finally denies God by establishing himself in God's stead.

On this note Pharaoh's crime against God is complete. As a side comment, Pharaoh was not alone in committing this particular transgression. Hiram, prince of Tyre, Nebuchadnezzar, and Joash, king of Judah (alternatively, Sennacherib) also claimed divinity for themselves.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, according to one rabbinic statement, these are "the gods" referred to in Ex. 5:11. Thus:

"Who is like You among the gods O Lord?" (This means) who is like unto You among those who call themselves gods? Pharaoh ... Sennacherib ... Nebuchadnezzar ... the prince of Tyre ...<sup>30</sup>

#### Pharaoh's disdain for God's miracles as performed by Moses and Aaron

Moses and Aaron's first encounter with Pharaoh was clearly unsuccessful. Indeed, rather than work for Israel's benefit it really resulted in their disadvantage. Instead of heeding

God's request, Pharaoh retaliated and did just the opposite. Not only did he refuse to let Israel go, but he increased burdens on Israel in addition.

The Bible then records that Moses and Aaron returned to Pharaoh a second time with their same original request. (Ex. 7:10-13) Most probably, this is not truly a second audience with Pharaoh, but a priestly version which recapitulates and slightly varies the first account which is attributed to JE.<sup>31</sup> Our concern, though, is not with source criticism but rather, with the rabbinic treatment of a 'unified' text.

To return to the Biblical narrative, we see that on this second occasion Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh equipped with miracles to prove to the king that they truly were sent by God and that he should grant their wish. Needless to say, this new tactic was ineffectual: "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them as the Lord had said." (Ex. 7:13)

The problem of Pharaoh's "hardened heart" is an issue unto itself and will be examined later. Our purpose here is less analytical. For the moment we want to postpone making any interpretations and instead simply examine the rabbinic comments as they present themselves.

Accordingly, the first item we notice is that Pharaoh's demand that Moses and Aaron prove themselves with miracles was well within his rights. It was not, in other words, a presumptuous request:

R. Judah, son of R. Shalom said: God said, 'Pharaoh

is quite right to say, "Show a wonder for you," (Ex. 7:) for so you find in the case of Noah.' After all the miracles which God had performed for him in the ark, when He brought him forth and said to him, "And the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh," (Gen. 9:15) Noah began to demand a sign and God had to assure him, "I have set My bow in the cloud and it shall be for a token." (Gen. 9:16) If Noah who was righteous asked for a sign, shall not Pharaoh who is wicked certainly do so? Similarly, in the case of Hezekiah ... Now if righteous men ask for a sign, then how much more so the wicked?<sup>32</sup>

Once the miracles were performed, however, it appears clear that Pharaoh was not going to recognize them. For one thing, it seems that Pharaoh did not expect his challenge to be answered. However, once it was, he was not about to approve it:

"Aaron cast down his rod." (Ex. 7:10) When that happened Pharaoh laughed at them. He said to Moses and Aaron, 'What do you think? That you have come to make fun of me? I am not afraid of these things. All of Egypt is full of sorcerers. Are there those who carry straw to Ephraim (a town plentiful with straw), or gold to Rekem?<sup>33</sup>

A similar reply is the following:

Then Pharaoh began to mock them and crow at them like a cock, saying to them, 'So these be the signs of your God! It is usual for people from one place to take goods to a place which has a shortage of them; but does one import murics (pickles) into Apamea or fish into Acco? Are you not aware that all kinds of magic are performed in my province?<sup>34</sup>

Moses was not put off by the sarcasm of Pharaoh's retort. Moses' reply - "To Herbtown carry herbs" - refutes Pharaoh's objection. What Moses is suggesting is that such a place becomes a market town for that particular commodity and thus it is only sensible to bring that item there in great number.<sup>35</sup>

This logic, as might be expected, did not impress Pharaoh. Or, even if it did, he still regarded Moses' miracles as acts



of witchcraft and not wonders done by God.<sup>36</sup> Pharaoh showed his skepticism by having not only his sorcerers perform the same miracles, but by having children and even his wife do so as well:

Immediately he sent for and had children brought from their schools and even they performed these wonders. Moreover, he called his wife and she did thus, for it says, "The Pharaoh also called." (Ex. 7:11) Why "also"? Because his wife whom he called also did this ... Why the word "also"? Even children of four and five he called and they did likewise.<sup>37</sup>

This display of magic by even a woman and children - considered helpless along with the orphan and the widow - was all that Pharaoh needed to be convinced that Moses and Aaron's so-called miracles were likewise merely acts of sorcery. If the Egyptians could turn their rods into serpents too then there was nothing unique about the tricks performed by the Hebrews and they could justly be ignored.

Appropriately, Aaron's one final act - having his rod swallow up the other rods (Ex. 7:12) - was designed to address just this stalemate:

God said at that time, 'If Aaron's serpent will swallow up the serpents of the Egyptians, there will be nothing remarkable in that for serpents usually swallow each other. Therefore let it resume its original form and swallow up their serpents.' Hence what is the meaning of "But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rod"? R. Eleazar said: To teach us that a double wonder occurred: the rod resuming its original form and then swallowing up their serpents. When Pharaoh beheld this he was amazed and said, 'What will happen if he now says to his rod, "Swallow up Pharaoh and his throne"? It would at once swallow me up!'<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, despite this fear instilled in Pharaoh by this

last feat, Pharaoh remained unconvinced and unthreatened. As we noted earlier, "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he would not listen to them as the Lord had said." (Ex. 7:13)

Pharaoh's disdain for Moses - God's representative - as manifested by the king's attempts on Moses' life

According to the Biblical chronology, Moses, during his childhood and youth was as yet uncommissioned by God to rescue the Hebrew people. The official call did not come until Moses was in exile in Midian where he experienced the theophany at the burning bush. Unofficially, however, Moses is regarded as Israel's redeemer, at least potentially, not only at birth, but, in fact, even already at his conception. This will be documented shortly.

Our present concern is that Pharaoh made three attempts on Moses' life during the early phase of Moses' career, that is, before he was officially drafted by God. These three incidents and one fourth threat which was never carried out are the subject of this section of this chapter.

(a) The first such episode occurred immediately with Moses' birth. Tragically, as will unfold, more was at stake than just Moses' life. Pharaoh's advisors convinced him that Israel's soon-to-be-born saviour would die by water. This awareness they had arrived at through their magic, but they did not know, however, which unborn child would be the savior. Consequently, as a guaranteed way of insuring the death of this special infant Pharaoh ordered all the Hebrew firstborn cast into the Nile. The following account relates Pharaoh's

premonition of Moses' birth and his misguided effort to kill him:

"And Pharaoh commanded ... all sons cast into the Nile." (Ex. 1:22) At the moment (when) Moses' mother became pregnant with him the wicked Pharaoh saw in a dream of his a sheep lying down and she gave birth to a lamb. He beheld scales hanging down between the earth and the firmament and they brought the lamb (to him) and placed it on one of the scales. They brought all the silver and gold of Egypt and placed it on the other scale and she (the lamb) outbalanced all of it. And even still, when they brought all the weapons of Egypt and added it to the silver and gold, the calf outweighed it. In the morning Pharaoh sent for and brought all his sorcerers and magicians and he recounted his dream to them. They said to him, 'The ewe which you saw lying down is this nation which is living in Egypt and the calf which she bore as a son will go out from here in the future. And in the future he will destroy Egypt and will conquer all the nations under him.' He said to them, 'He has already been born.' They said to him, 'He has not yet been born though this night his mother became pregnant with him.' He said to them, 'What will be the cause of his death?' They said to him, 'His death will be by water.'<sup>39</sup>

Fortunately for the Hebrews the decree to cast the children into the Nile was cancelled almost as soon as it was issued thereby diminishing its effect:

After they had thrown Moses (into the water) they (Pharaoh's advisors) said, 'We do not see that sign any longer.' Thereupon they rescinded their decree.<sup>40</sup>

This explains then only the repeal of the order. But how was it that Moses survived if, after all, it was predicted that he would die by water? The answer lies not merely in Moses' rescue at the hand of Pharaoh's daughter. More important, the answer lies in the fact that the Egyptian magicians were only partially correct in their prediction:

Our rabbis taught: Three beheld but did not see, namely, Nebat, Ahitophel, and Pharaoh's astrologers ...<sup>41</sup>

This is what R. Hama b. Hanina said: What means the text, "These are the waters of Meribah ..."? (Num. 20:13) "These are" (are the waters) about which Pharaoh's magicians saw and erred.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Pharaoh was thwarted in his effort to kill the Hebrew savior because of the inaccuracy of his advisors' prophecy. This in itself might be considered proper vindication by the rabbis. However, this is not the case: not only were the advisors proven wrong, but they were punished for their degree of involvement in the scheme in the first place:

R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Simai: There were three in that plan: Balaam, Job, and Jethro. Balaam, because he devised it, was slain. Job, because he kept silent, was afflicted with suffering. Jethro, because he fled, merited that those of his descendants should sit in the Chamber of the Hewn Stones (i.e., as scholars).<sup>43</sup>

(b) Pharaoh's second attempt on Moses' life was in response to a not so innocent behavior of Moses in his childhood. This well-known episode, often misidentified as a Bible story, is entirely rabbinic in origin. What follows is just the opening scene of this incident:

Pharaoh's daughter used to kiss and hug him (Moses) and loved him as if he were her own son and would not allow him out of the royal palace. Because he was so handsome everyone was eager to see him and whoever saw him could not tear himself away from him. Pharaoh (also) used to kiss and hug him and he (Moses) used to take the crown of Pharaoh and place it on his own head ...<sup>44</sup>

The message of this seemingly benign action of Moses was transparent to the rabbis. Moses was simply rehearsing the events

that would come. He took Pharaoh's crown and placed it on his own head "as he was destined to do when he became great."<sup>45</sup> But this was not the only significance of this action. For the rabbis, yet another message spoke much more immediately to their own situation:

... The Holy One blessed be He said to Hiram, "So I have brought forth fire from the midst of you; it consumed you." (Ezek. 28:18) Thus, Pharaoh's daughter raised the one who in the future would exact punishment of her father and his country.<sup>46</sup>

Even so, the Messianic King who will one day punish Edom dwells with them in that province, as it says, "There shall the calf feed and there shall he lie down." (Isa. 27:10)<sup>47</sup> (Though not exclusively, "Edom" is often used as a pseudonym for Rome in the rabbinic literature.)

For the rabbis, then, Moses' childhood action was seen as a symbol of hope. Pharaoh's magicians, on the other hand, were not as sanguine about the matter. Their interpretation of the incident was the same as the rabbis, but instead of giving them reason to cheer it gave them reason to despair. Moreover, it motivated their second plot against Moses:

The magicians of Egypt sat there and said, 'We are afraid of him who is taking off your crown and placing it upon his own head lest he be the one of whom we prophesy that he will take the kingdom from you.' Some of them counselled to kill him and others to burn him, but Jethro was present among them and he said to them, 'This boy has no sense. However, test him by placing before him a gold vessel and a live coal; if he stretches forth his hand for the gold, then he has sense and you should slay him, but if he reaches for the live coal, then he has no sense and there can be no sentence of death upon him.'<sup>48</sup>

Was Jethro stalling for time or acting knowingly in cahoots with God? That we are not told, but in either case his recom-



mendation was accepted. Let the midrash tell the rest of the story in its own words:

So they brought these things before him and he extended his hand to take the gold when Gabriel came and pushed his hand aside. He (then) seized the live coal and thrust his hand with the live coal into his mouth so that his tongue was burnt with the result that he became slow of speech and of tongue.<sup>49</sup>

To state the obvious, Pharaoh's plan to trap Moses was again thwarted. The audacity of Pharaoh and his advisors that they might outwit God is again clearly demonstrated.

(c) One further attempt was made by Pharaoh on Moses' life. Specific reference is made to this incident in the Bible: "When Pharaoh heard of it" - that Moses had slayed an Egyptian - "he sought to kill Moses." (Ex. 2:15) Nothing more, however, is said about this episode as far as any actions Pharaoh took are concerned. As for Moses, the verse just quoted continues tersely, "but Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well."

The rabbinic version of this episode, on the other hand, is far from tranquil and, to the contrary, is much more dramatic. For one thing, Pharaoh's informers are identified. They were the infamous Dathan and Abiram who later would commit a series of crimes most notable of which was their participation in the Korah uprising (Num. 14). Dathan and Abiram are also identified as the two Hebrews Moses encountered struggling together when he made his second visit among his people. (Ex. 2:13-14) This association makes the incident all the more reprehensible. The fact that it was two fellow Hebrews who



testified against Moses only highlights the irony of the situation.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to identifying Pharaoh's informers the rabbinic literature also elaborates on the attempt on Moses' life itself. What follows is an account of this episode as it is pieced together from a number of sources:

... When Pharaoh heard this he said, 'I have heard ever so many things (about Moses) and said nothing; now that he has gone so far as to murder, seize him.'<sup>51</sup>

... They brought Moses up to the platform and Pharaoh wished to kill him.<sup>52</sup>

... Pharaoh sent for a sword that had no equal and struck him ten times upon his neck, but the neck of Moses became like an ivory pillar and he could not harm him, as it is said, "Your neck is as a tower of ivory." (S.S. 7:5)<sup>53</sup>

... R. Abiathar said: And what is more, the sword slid off Moses' neck and turned on the executioner.<sup>54</sup>

As for Moses' escape from Pharaoh, there are two alternative interpretations. The first is as follows:

"And Moses fled from Pharaoh." (Ex. 2:15) R. Jannai said: Is it possible for a man to escape from a king? No. But when they seized Moses and condemned him to be beheaded, an angel from heaven descended in the form of Moses and while they seized the angel meanwhile Moses escaped.<sup>55</sup>

A second version explains Moses' escape in equally miraculous terms, but without recourse to the deus ex machina appearance of an angel:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: Of all the counselors who sat before Pharaoh, some became dumb, others deaf, and others blind. When he said to the dumb, 'Where is Moses?' there was no reply. When he spoke to the deaf, they did not hear; to the blind, they did not see. This is what God said to Moses, "Who has made man's mouth?" (Ex. 4:11), namely, who made a

mouth unto Pharaoh that he should say, 'Bring Moses to the scaffold to be slain.' Or, "Who makes a man dumb?" - who made the counselors mute, deaf, and blind that they should not fetch you to him? And who made you clever enough to escape? "Is it not I, the Lord?"<sup>56</sup>

Regardless of the interpretations, the outcomes are the same in both cases. As would be expected, Pharaoh is blocked in his effort to kill Moses. Also common to both versions is the presence of God. Directly or indirectly, God's presence is the underlying reason for Pharaoh's failures. Most explicit in the second case, though implicit in the first, God is in total control of the situation. He designed both the dilemma and its solution. As we will observe again, this pattern will repeat itself. God is no innocent bystander in this Exodus saga.

(d) The three plots against Moses' life just discussed all occurred during that period in Moses' life prior to his official call by God to be His agent. One solitary reference recounts yet a fourth plot by Pharaoh which, unlike the other three, occurred during the period after Moses had returned to Egypt on his mission to take the children of Israel out of bondage. This plot, really only a threat, was as ineffectual as the rest of Pharaoh's schemes:

When Moses departed from Pharaoh (after performing the miracle of turning the rod into a serpent) Pharaoh said, 'If this son of Amram comes to me (again) I will slay him, I will crucify him, I will burn him.' But when Moses did come again Pharaoh immediately became a rod.<sup>57</sup>

This final image is a very appropriate one. It symbolizes generally the other cases as well. Pharaoh, full of plans

and great ideas to rid the world of Moses, ultimately speaks only empty words; he is merely full of "hot air." Vanquished always by God, Pharaoh is reduced to impotence. He becomes a harmless rod, powerless to bite.

## CONCLUSION

We began this study of Pharaoh's crimes with the observation that Pharaoh was "the enemy" and that evil permeated his very being. Having conducted this survey of Pharaoh's transgressions, this initial characterization is clearly justified.

One last question still remains: is there a common denominator among Pharaoh's crimes, both those committed against humanity and those committed against God? Is there one explanation, in other words, for Pharaoh's evil personality, one solitary thread which binds all of Pharaoh's sins together?

To suggest an answer is to risk oversimplification. Nonetheless, perhaps Pharaoh's wickedness can be summed up as basically a manifestation of his arrogance. Ultimately, says one of the rabbis, this was what led to his downfall: "Pharaoh, king of Egypt, was uprooted from the world because of his haughtiness."<sup>58</sup> This statement, in turn, merely echoes an earlier version of the same thought expressed much more universally in the Bible, as it says, "A man's pride shall bring him low." (Prov. 29:23) Pharaoh, so it seems, was a case in point.

## CHAPTER III

### THE PUNISHMENT OF PHARAOH

#### INTRODUCTION

The last chapter established conclusively that Pharaoh, according to the rabbinic view, was committed to evil and evil doings. This being the case, one would expect that Pharaoh was deserving of punishment on account of all of his crimes. What is logical, however, does not always transpire for despite Pharaoh's proven wickedness he was spared punishment as long as Israel remained in Egypt under his auspices.<sup>1</sup> This immunity was granted, in other words, not because of Pharaoh's innocence, but because of his association with Israel. Likewise, God reprieved Pharaoh not out of consideration for Pharaoh's goodness, which he obviously lacked, but out of consideration for the position he occupied: "The Holy One blessed be He said to Moses, 'Even though I really ought to punish him, treat him with respect and show him the respect due to his regal position.'"<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, though, because of the multitude of Pharaoh's crimes Pharaoh's immunity from punishment could not be enforced forever; his protection was finally removed. Yet even then, when God did mete out punishment on Pharaoh, He was not malicious and did not treat Pharaoh with disrespect. God could have had his angels exact punishment of Pharaoh - which would have been impersonal and insulting to Pharaoh - but He chose instead to deal with Pharaoh personally: "the Holy One

blessed be He showed him honor and executed punishment on him directly by His own power."<sup>3</sup>

The acts of vengeance performed against Pharaoh can be divided into two phases. The first stage, which will be examined in part one of this chapter, entails all of God's afflictions of Pharaoh up to and including the ninth plague. These punishments are preliminary ones and set the stage for the crucial tenth plague - the slaying of the first-born Egyptian - and the drowning of the Egyptian people at the Reed Sea. This latter material will be discussed in part two of this chapter. Special emphasis will be placed on the destiny which befell Pharaoh in the denouement of this saga.



## PART 1 - PRELIMINARY AFFLICTIONS

Moses and Aaron were, quite obviously, unsuccessful in their initial encounters with Pharaoh in persuading him to let the Hebrew people go. Words alone fell on deaf ears and a show of miracles was equally disregarded. But this should come as no surprise. God had specifically forewarned Moses that "I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go." (Ex. 4:21)

The implication of this stubbornness - to what degree it was self-created, to what degree it was God-caused - will be examined shortly. Of more immediate concern, however, is that a new approach had to be taken to convince Pharaoh to release Israel. This new approach took the form of punishment of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Because of all of Pharaoh's crimes retribution was inevitable in any case, but punishment had another rationale as well, namely, that this was the only way of having any effect on Pharaoh: "Pharaoh had to be smitten before he would let Israel go."<sup>4</sup> It was useless, in other words, to plead with Pharaoh. However, he would listen to punishments exacted against him by God.

The appropriate punishment was the slaying of the first-born Egyptian sons:

"And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me"; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son.'" (Ex. 4:22-23)

This enactment apparently would have been sufficient in and of itself to avenge Israel and compel Pharaoh to release the He-

brews. According to one source, God intended to commence the plagues upon Egypt with this plague of the first-born. However, God was wary of following this plan. He knew that if he brought the plague of the firstborn at the outset, that Pharaoh would send Israel out at once.<sup>5</sup> Such a plan would obviously bring quick results, but several other factors enter in which mandate a less hasty release of the Hebrews. These extenuating circumstances are the following: God's desire to exact full retribution of Pharaoh for all of his crimes, God's desire to demonstrate His own divinity and Pharaoh's lack thereof, and, God's sense of justice which required that Pharaoh be given an opportunity to repent and thereby achieve a diminished sentence if not a stay of sentence altogether.

God's desire to exact full retribution of Pharaoh for all of his crimes

According to the Bible, the tenth plague is simply an answer to Pharaoh's refusal to let the Hebrews go. (Ex. 4:22-23) However, if this plague were enacted at the beginning and the Hebrews were immediately released, then Pharaoh's other crimes would go unpunished. Consequently, the other nine plagues are interjected to even up this score too.

In general terms, the plagues are intended to execute judgment upon Pharaoh for having made the Hebrews serve with rigor.<sup>6</sup> In more specific terms, each of the plagues is explained in the rabbinic literature as an instance of measure for measure retribution.<sup>7</sup> The punishment, in other words, is uniquely inspired by the crime itself. An example of this idea

of rabbinic justice is the following explanation of the first plague:

"And there shall be blood throughout all the lands of Egypt." (Ex. 7:19) Why did the Holy One blessed be He punish them with the plague of blood? (Because of the principle of) measure for measure. For thus He said to Abraham, "And also that nation whom they shall serve, I will judge." (Gen. 15:14) Because they did not let the daughters of Israel immerse themselves after their impurity, so that they should not increase (i.e., intercourse is prohibited in the state of impurity); on this account they were smitten with blood.<sup>8</sup>

Pharaoh, of course, was not the only victim of these plagues. The Egyptian people too were guilty of harsh treatment of the Hebrews and the plagues serve to punish them as well. Nonetheless, Pharaoh's culpability is in a special category all to itself:

A Tanna taught: He (Pharaoh) originated the plan first and therefore was punished first. He originated the plan first, as it written, "And he said unto his people ... come let us deal shrewdly with them ..." (Ex. 1:9-10) Therefore, he was punished first, as it is written, "And on you, and on your people, and on all your servants (shall come up the frogs)." (Ex. 7:29)<sup>9</sup>

Thus, one purpose of delaying the tenth plague is to exact a full and complete retribution of Pharaoh. This is not for the purpose of prolonging Pharaoh's suffering, but rather, to do justice to the victims of the crimes which he committed.

God's desire to demonstrate His own divinity and Pharaoh's lack thereof

A second major factor which calls for the postponement of the last plague is God's desire to demonstrate to Pharaoh and the Egyptians that He is the Lord. This message would, of course, be implicit in the tenth plague, but by putting it off,

God, as it were, has an even greater opportunity to get glory upon Himself. In this sense, the preliminary plagues in effect set the stage for God's great finale:

Scripture says that when God exacts punishment of the nations, His name becomes renowned in the world ... (Thus,) "And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 14:4) In the past, they did not know the Lord, but here (it is said), "And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, God keeps Pharaoh and the Egyptians alive not because He is unable to kill them for lack of power, but rather, so that they might proclaim His praise to the world. Pharaoh, in particular, is kept alive to serve as God's ambassador to the nations:

The Holy One blessed be He said to him, 'Woe unto you, wicked one! You think that I will not be able to cut you off from the world. Learn from the cattle plague (murrain) which I sent. Had I sent it to you and your people, you would have been cut off from the earth, but I did not send it to you except that I might show you My great might and that you would tell of My strength throughout the land, as it is written, "But for this purpose have I let you live, to show you My power, and that My name be declared throughout all the earth." (Ex. 9:16)<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis of God on His namesake - l'mah-an sh'mo - is not motivated by vanity on God's part; rather, it is motivated by God's concern for humankind that they, as part of His universal plan, should come to know the Lord and worship Him. In addition, by heaping praise and fame upon Himself and thereby demonstrating that He is the Lord, God, by implication, shows that Pharaoh is not. In other words, there is as much at stake here in revealing Pharaoh's false deification as there is in proclaiming the true Godhood of the Lord.

A number of sources speak to this issue. The first addresses Pharaoh's self-proclaimed deification in terms of one of the plagues in particular:

What is the meaning of "And the river will swarm with frogs"? (Ex. 7:28) The Holy One blessed be He said to him (Pharaoh), 'You have said, "The river is mine"; well, I will show you whether it is Mine or yours. My plague shall come upon it and I will decree that it bring forth frogs, just as in the beginning (of the world) when I decreed, "Let the waters swarm." (Gen. 1:20) and they performed My commandments; and so similarly will the Nile perform My decree.'<sup>12</sup>

Another source is even more damaging as far as Pharaoh's godhood is concerned. This statement is not made in reference to one specific plague, but rather is placed in the context of the plagues in general:

The Lord said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh." (Ex. 9:13) "Behold he goes out to the water." (Ex. 7:15) Why did he go out to the water? Because this wicked one boasted that he was a god and did not need to go out to relieve himself. Therefore, he went out to the water at daybreak so that nobody would see him standing in his disgrace. Thus the Holy One blessed be He said to Moses, 'Go out at dawn at such time that he tends to his needs. Grab him and say to him, "Thus says the Lord ... 'Let my people go ... for this time I will send all my plagues upon you, upon your servants, and upon your people that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth ...'" (Ex. 9:13-15)<sup>13</sup>

A variation on this last reference is much more crude, but all the more direct and sarcastic in its public ridicule of Pharaoh:

Why did Moses go to him in the morning? In order to say to him, 'Give me an answer concerning the matter which I sent to you on their behalf (i.e., to let the Hebrews go).' He responded, 'Wait until I have moved my bowels.' He said to him, 'But did you not say that you created yourself!? Control your bowels!' But



since Pharaoh intended to relieve himself and arranged his garments to facilitate this, the Holy One blessed be He said to Moses, 'Wait him out,' for He had many judgments to get even with him, (especially) in his intestines, as it says, "and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your son's son how I have made sport of the Egyptians ..." (Ex. 10:2) ... They said: When Pharaoh went to relieve himself he strained himself, but nothing came forth until finally his intestines fell from him. Then mice came and bit him in his rear end and he cried such a great cry that all the members of his household and his palace heard and came to see his disgrace and his degradation ...<sup>14</sup>

One further source should be cited for its mockery of Pharaoh:

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'See, I make you as God to Pharaoh ...'" (Ex. 7:1) God said to Moses, 'The wicked Pharaoh has made himself out to be a god, as it says, "My river is my own and I have made it for myself." (Ezek. 29:3); let him, therefore, see you and say, "This is God."'<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Pharaoh will see that Moses, a mortal, is superior and more powerful than he is. The corollary to this observation is equally obvious: Pharaoh would also be forced to admit the folly of his own divinity.

God's sense of justice which required that Pharaoh be given an opportunity to repent and thereby achieve a diminished sentence if not a stay of sentence altogether

One final consideration justified God's postponement of the tenth plague. This was His commitment to mercy and His willing desire to forgive rather than to punish:

You are fair and mighty in power for You gave an extension of time to the generation of the flood to make repentance, but they did not repent ... similarly, you find in the case of the men of the Tower that You gave them an extension of time that they might repent, but they did not ... similarly, you find in the case of the people of Sodom ... (And also in the



case of Egypt), You brought ten plagues upon the Egyptians in Egypt, but You did not definitely decree upon them destruction until they displayed their utmost wickedness before You.<sup>16</sup>

Pharaoh may have been declared guilty, but before his sentence was to be carried out he was entitled an opportunity to confess his crime and thereby alter the punishment which was coming to him. Thus, though Pharaoh had refused at the outset to let the Hebrews go, he was given subsequent occasions in which to do so in order to win himself a pardon for his initial crime.

Moses consequently approached Pharaoh time and time again with the repeated request that he let the Hebrews go. Pharaoh's refusal to comply with the request would be met by a plague, but only after he had been duly warned that the plague would be the result of his own obstinance:

It is written, "Behold, God does loftily in his power; who is a teacher like Him?" (Job 36:22) ... "Who is a teacher like Him?" - teaching the way of repentance. This you find in the case of Moses whose strength God exalted in order to perform His charge. He became a teacher to the wicked Pharaoh, urging him to repent, as it is written, "Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh." (Ex. 9:13) He gave Moses strength to rise early and stand before Pharaoh and Moses pointed out to Pharaoh the path of penitence, for it says, "And say unto him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews ... for I will this time ...'" (Ex. 9:13-4)<sup>17</sup>

God could have brought the plagues without warning, but His sense of justice, unlike a human sense of justice, mandated that such a warning be given:

It is customary for a man who wishes to bring evil upon his enemy that he will bring it upon him all of a sudden so that he will not suspect him of it beforehand, but the Holy One blessed

be He would forewarn the wicked Pharaoh of each plague, as it says, "Behold, the hand of the Lord will fall ..." (Ex. 9:3); "Behold, I will cause very heavy hail to fall ..." (Ex. 9:18); "Behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts ..." (Ex. 10:4) and so forth with all of them ...<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, despite all these warnings, Pharaoh refused to let the Hebrew people go. Thus, the plagues were fully justified, but even they were not severe enough to persuade Pharaoh to change his ways. For example, Pharaoh ignored the first plague altogether. He was unimpressed with the feat of turning water into blood, an act his magicians could do as well. Thus, "Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said." (Ex. 7:22);

"And Pharaoh turned and went into his house ..." (Ex. 7:23) "And Pharaoh turned" - he did not fear nor feel this plague of God.<sup>19</sup>

The second plague, however, that of frogs, had a much different effect on Pharaoh. In this instance, unlike the previous plague, Pharaoh himself was personally afflicted by the frogs in keeping with the Scriptural passage "the frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on your servants." (Ex. 7:29) In fact, according to one rabbinic source, the frogs actually entered Pharaoh and the Egyptians and plagued them from within. ("The frogs shall come up on you - u'v'chah" is read as "the frogs shall come up in you."<sup>20</sup> In any case, Pharaoh could not tolerate this affliction:

As soon as the punishment touched his body, immediately he felt (the pain) and began to cry, "Entreat the Lord that He take away the frogs from me." (Ex. 8:4)<sup>21</sup>

Similarly:

... The Holy One blessed be He brought plagues upon the Egyptians, but Pharaoh did not feel them; but as soon as his own body was smitten he began to feel the pain and to cry, "The Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked." (Ex. 9:27)<sup>22</sup>

It seems, then, that Pharaoh was willing to repent, though only after the punishment. But this is merely a passing change of mood. As soon as there was a let up from the affliction, Pharaoh reverted to his evil ways and reneged on his earlier promise to let the Hebrews go:

"But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them." (Ex. 8:11) - This is the way of the wicked. When they are in trouble they cry, but when they have respite, they return to their perversity.<sup>23</sup>

This pattern repeats itself for the other plagues as well. Moses requests Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go, but Pharaoh refuses. Moses warns Pharaoh of impending doom, but even this has no effect on the king.<sup>24</sup> And then, finally, when the plague is carried out it effects Pharaoh only as long as it is enforced. Once the plague is removed, Pharaoh's heart is hardened once again.

What differs among the plagues, specifically between the first five and the latter five, is the cause of Pharaoh's renewed stubbornness. According to a number of rabbinic sources, Pharaoh's wickedness, particularly his recalcitrance, was initially self-determined. However, this situation did not remain this way permanently:

When the Holy One blessed be He perceived that he did not relent after the first five plagues, He said, 'Henceforth, even if he wants to repent,

I will harden his heart in order to exact punishment from him' ... for so it is written,  
"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart." (Ex. 7:3)<sup>25</sup>

But if this is the case, that God was not going to withhold repentance from Pharaoh and in fact prevent Pharaoh from sending the Hebrews forth - "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand" (Ex. 3:19) - what right does God have to punish Pharaoh for crimes he no longer commits freely? If it is not within Pharaoh's power to release the Hebrews, how then can he be penalized for holding onto them?

The rabbis anticipated this objection and counter it in their commentary:

"For I have hardened his heart." (Ex. 10:1)  
R. Yohanan said: Is this not a pretext to heretics to argue that he had no means for repenting, since it says, "For I have hardened his heart."? R. Simeon b. Lakish said to him: Let the mouths of the heretics be stopped up, for "If it concerns the scorners, He scorns them." (Prov. 3:34) When the Holy One blessed be He warns a man once, twice, and even a third time, and he still does not repent, then God closes his heart against repentance in order to exact vengeance from him for his sins. Thus it was with the wicked Pharaoh. Since the Holy One blessed be He sent five times to him and he took no notice of His words, the Holy One blessed be He said to him, 'You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart. Behold I will add uncleanness to your uncleanness.' Hence, "For I have hardened his heart." (Ex. 10:1)<sup>26</sup>

In summary, Pharaoh had had his chance to change his ways, but he abused this privilege which was granted to him. In the meanwhile, God had demonstrated His own divinity and revealed the humanity of Pharaoh. Also, God had avenged Pharaoh of his other crimes. Thus, now that Pharaoh could not repent and

God's other tasks were completed, there was no longer any reason to postpone the redemption of the Hebrews. All that was left to be done was to enact the tenth plague and bring on the final destruction of the Egyptians: "... when the Holy One blessed be He withholds repentance from the sinner, he can not repent except through the death he will die because of his iniquity which he did freely at the beginning."<sup>27</sup>

## PART 2 - FINAL RETRIBUTION

The completion of the first nine plagues set the stage for God's final victory over Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The inevitability of this outcome had been implicit from the start, but with Pharaoh's rebuff of Moses' ninth request to let the Hebrews go and serve their God, then the die is cast for good. There is no longer any turning back:

... Pharaoh said, 'How long will you continue coming? "Get away from me, take heed to yourself; never see my face again."' (Ex. 10:28) Moses answered, "As you say. I will not see your face again." (Ex. 10:29) (Then) the Holy One blessed be He said, 'What do I still need to do? To inform Pharaoh of one more plague.' Immediately therefore, God hurriedly entered the palace of Pharaoh for the sake of Moses who had said, "I will not see your face again," so that he might not appear untruthful ... the Holy One blessed be He spoke to Moses (in the presence of Pharaoh thereby informing him too) as it says, "Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh." (Ex. 11:1)<sup>28</sup>

On hearing this announcement Moses rejoiced and began to publicly proclaim the imminence of the tenth plague. (Ex. 11:4f) In addition, though he was excused from personally warning Pharaoh about the tenth plague, Moses nonetheless had the last word in the encounter:

'You say well, "Never see my face again." I will no longer come to you, for you will come to me, and not only you, but also your governor and all your courtiers shall come running with you to me, imploring and prostrating themselves to me for us to depart from here,' as it says, "And all these your servants shall come down to me, and bow down to me, saying, 'Get you out, and all the people who follow you.'" (Ex. 11:8)<sup>29</sup>

Moses' retort was indeed prophetic. However, before this episode took place, and, even before the plague itself was



enacted, one last effort was made by a group of Egyptians to persuade Pharaoh to release the Hebrews and thereby avert the final plague. Needless to say, this attempt, entirely rabbinic in origin, was unsuccessful:

"And all the first-born shall die." (Ex. 11:5) All the first-born gathered around their fathers and said to them, 'Moses brought on us all which he said he would bring upon us. If you desire that we live, then come and we will expel these Hebrews from our midst, for if not, then behold, we are dead men.' The fathers answered them, 'Even if all of the Egyptians die, they are not going out from here.' What did they do? All the first-born gathered themselves and went to Pharaoh and cried to him, 'Please, send out this people for it is because of them that the evil will come upon us and upon you.' He said to his servants, 'Break their backs.' What did the first-born do? Immediately, they went out and each one drew his sword and killed his father, as it is said, "To Him who smote Egypt with their first-born." (Ps. 136:10) Scripture does not say here, "To Him that smote the first-born of Egypt," *לְהַמְּוֹת בְּכֹרֵי מִצְרָיִם* but says, "To Him that smote Egypt with their first-born." *לְהַמְּוֹת מִצְרָיִם בְּכֹרֵיהֶם* After they had killed their fathers, the Holy One blessed be He revealed Himself to them and killed them, as it says, "And He killed all the first-born." (Ex. 12:29)<sup>30</sup>

Variations on this passage relate that the first-born had hoped that Pharaoh, himself a first-born, would take pity upon himself and consequently accede to their request to release the Hebrews. Nonetheless, this tact too was in vain. The first-born, attempting to solicit Pharaoh's mercy, incurred his wrath instead.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the result of this last-ditch effort to avoid the tenth plague was actually to bring it on.

According to the rabbinic literature, however, two notable personalities were exempted from this decree against the first-born even though they themselves fell into this category. One was Pharaoh. The other was Bityah, Pharaoh's daughter, who

was spared as a reward for her having saved Moses when he was cast into the Nile as a baby.<sup>32</sup> As for Pharaoh, first it must be demonstrated that he actually was a first-born because he is not identified as one in the Bible:

"At midnight the Lord struck all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on his throne ..." (Ex. 12:29) "From the first-born of Pharaoh" - I might think that this refers to his son, (but) his son is already referred to as the one "who sits on the throne." (In this case) why does the text speak of "from the first-born of Pharaoh"? It teaches that the wicked Pharaoh was a first-born himself.<sup>33</sup>

Also implicit in the expression "from the first-born of Pharaoh" is Pharaoh's exemption. This is because the phrase could be translated to read "except for the first-born of Pharaoh." The mem of mee'b'cor (i.e., mee- first-born) might as easily imply exclusion as it does inclusion. In any case, why was Pharaoh exempt from this judgment of God? An answer to this question is found in a continuation of the last source:

But he was not struck by divine punishment. Why was this? In order to conquer the hearts of the Egyptians that they might say, 'Pharaoh is strong because no punishments were exacted upon him.' (Furthermore), of Him Scripture says, "He makes nations great and destroys them." (Job. 12:23)<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Pharaoh received a reprieve from this decree, but this pardon was only temporary. Pharaoh, too, would ultimately be punished by God.

In the meanwhile, however, Pharaoh still feared for his life because he thought that as a first-born he also would be a victim of this tenth plague. Consequently, he rose up in the night and sought out Moses as it had been predicted he would do. In so doing, Pharaoh elicited the following comment

from Moses: "What does Pharaoh seek? Who now comes to whom, you to me, or I to you?"<sup>35</sup> Another source describes in greater depth Pharaoh's fear, the search for Moses, and the subsequent encounter between the Hebrew and the Egyptian:

Pharaoh went and called (for Moses) in the night in every street and said, 'Where is Moses, where does he live?' The children of the Israelites made fun of him and said to Pharaoh, 'Where are you going?' He said to them, 'I am looking for Moses.' They said, 'He lives here,' (thereby misdirecting him) until he finally came upon Moses. Pharaoh said to him, "Rise up and go forth from among my people." (Ex. 2:31) Moses replied to him, 'Are we thieves (that we should slip away at night)? The Holy One blessed be He said, "No man shall go out of his house until morning." (Ex. 12:22)' Pharaoh said to him, 'Please, rise up and go forth.' Moses said to him, 'Why are you so urgent?' Pharaoh said to him, 'Because I am a first-born and I fear lest I will die.' Moses said to him, 'Do not be afraid on this account, for you are intended for something far greater than this.'<sup>36</sup>

Pharaoh, obviously, would not meet his fate prior to the drowning of the Egyptians at the Reed Sea. Until then, perhaps lulled into a false sense of security, Pharaoh bemoaned the fact that he had let the Hebrews go. The following two parables, examples of a number of others like them<sup>37</sup>, explain Pharaoh's misery and the injustice which he felt had been done to him by the release of the Hebrews:

"When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned ..." (Ex. 14:5) "And was turned" - They said, 'Not on their account does good come to us.' R. Jose the Galilean said in a parable: To what can this be compared? To a man to whom there has fallen as an inheritance a bet-kor of land (field requiring a kor of seed) which he sold for a trifle. The buyer went and opened up wells in it and planted gardens, trees, and orchards in it. The seller, on seeing that he had given his inheritance

for a trifle, began to choke with grief. So it happened to the Egyptians who let go without realizing what they let go. Of them it is stated in the traditional writings, "Your shoots (lit. "those whom you send away", sh'la-chay-ich) are an orchard of pomegranates." (S.S. 4:13)<sup>38</sup>

Likewise consider the following parable reminiscent of the Passover Dayyenu:

In the past, "Pharaoh's servants said to him, 'How long shall this man (Moses) be a snare to us?'" (Ex. 10:7) But now (Scripture reads): "And the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was turned toward the people and they said, 'What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?'" (Ex. 14:5) They said, 'If we had been plagued and had not sent them out, it would have been enough, but we were plagued and let them go. Or, if we had been plagued and had sent them out, and they had not taken our money, it would have been enough, but they plagued us, we sent them out, and they took our money. A parable: To what can this be compared? To one who said to his slave, 'Go and get me a fish from the market.' The slave went and brought him an ill-smelling fish. He said to the slave in a decree, 'Either you eat the fish or receive one hundred lashes or you pay one hundred manah.' The slave said, 'I will eat it.' He began to eat, but could not finish, until he said, 'I will take the lashes.' After receiving sixty lashes he could stand no more so that he said, 'I will pay the one hundred manah. The result was that he ate the fish, received the lashes, and paid one hundred manah. So also was it done to the Egyptians. They were plagued, they let Israel go, and their money was taken.'<sup>39</sup>

In the first parable, Pharaoh expresses his unawareness of Israel's value. In the second account Pharaoh takes umbrage at the treatment he was forced to endure. In either case, implicit in Pharaoh's attitude of regret for letting the Hebrews go is the assumption that it was Pharaoh who let the Hebrews go in the first place. As a number of sources point out, this assumption was erroneous. Perhaps Pharaoh had rea-



son to be upset because the Hebrews had departed, but not because he was the one who let them go:

Another interpretation of "And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go" (Ex. 13:17) ... Was it then Pharaoh who had let them go? Balaam said, "God brings them out of Egypt." (Num. 23:22) But here we are told, "And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go." (How do we explain this?) This, however, is to teach that Pharaoh escorted them and pleaded, 'Pray for me and ask for mercy for me,' as it says, "Take both your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also." (Ex. 12:32) The sending them forth spoken of here means only escorting them, as it says, "And Abraham went with them on the way." (Gen. 18:16)<sup>40</sup>

There is a similar controversy as to whether Pharaoh chased the Hebrews willingly or unwillingly. On the one hand, Pharaoh freely chose to pursue the Hebrews:

... When Pharaoh saw that the Israelites had gone out he said, 'It would not be worth our while to pursue the Israelites themselves for their sake, but for the sake of the silver and gold which they have taken from us it is worth while.' But when those of the people who lost but a little money saw it, they said, 'For the sake of a trifle shall we run after the Israelites?' When Pharaoh realized this he declared, 'We shall all be equal in sharing the spoil, as it is said, "I will divide the spoil."' (Ex. 15:9) and what is more, I will open to you the treasuries of silver and gold and distribute among you precious stones and pearls.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, and this view predominates, Pharaoh chased the Hebrews not on his own initiative, but because God caused him to do so:

"And I will harden the heart of Pharaoh and he will pursue them ..." (Ex. 14:4) - for his mind was divided whether to pursue or not to pursue.<sup>42</sup>

According to the Bible, God's purpose in hardening Pharaoh's heart was so that God would "get glory over Pharaoh and all his

host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." (Ex.

14:4) This theme is expanded upon in the midrash:

"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of Philistines ..." (Ex. 13:17) Another explanation of "God did not lead them" (lit. "God was not comforted", v'lo na-cham elohim) - Though Pharaoh had now let them go, God was not comforted. To what can it be compared? To a king whose son was taken captive and who went and saved him from the robbers and killed them. The son afterwards told his father how they had handled him and beaten him and enslaved him, with the result that though the king had slain them he was not comforted, but kept on repeating, 'So this was how they treated my son?' The Egyptians, likewise, enslaved Israel, as it says, "And they made their lives bitter" (Ex. 1:14), with the result that the Holy One blessed be He brought ten plagues upon them and redeemed his children. Nevertheless, the Holy One blessed be He was not appeased until He had slain them all, as it says, "And the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea." (Ex. 14:27), "The horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea." (Ex. 15:1), and, also, "Egypt shall be a desolation." (Joel 4:19). Hence does it say, "God did not lead them out" (i.e., "God was not comforted").<sup>43</sup>

This account explains God's enticement of Pharaoh purely in terms of revenge: God's purpose for inciting Pharaoh to pursue Israel was to draw Pharaoh to the sea where he and the Egyptians would be destroyed. Other sources, however, express God's motivation for the pursuit in less vindictive terms. Indeed, according to the following alternative explanation Pharaoh is made to pursue Israel not to be punished, but rather to facilitate a special relationship between God and Israel:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: It can be compared to a king who, on his journey, was appealed to by a princess (who said,) 'Please, save me from the hands of robbers.' The king hearkened and delivered her. In the course of time, he desired to marry her. He was very eager that she talk to him, but she did not want to. What did the



king do? He incited robbers (to capture her) so that she might cry and he should hear. As soon as the robbers seized her, she began to cry to the king. He said to her, 'I have been yearning for this, to hear your voice.' Similarly, as long as the children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt they cried and raised their eyes to the Holy One blessed be He, as it says, "And it came to pass in the course of those many days, etc., and the people cried for help and their cry came up to God." (Ex. 2:23) Immediately (we read), "And God saw the children of Israel and God knew their condition." (Ex. 2:25) and the Holy One blessed be He began to bring them out of there with "a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut. 7:19); the Holy One blessed be He wanted to hear their voice once again, but they were not willing. What did He do? He incited Pharaoh to pursue them, as it says, "When Pharaoh drew near ..." and immediately, "the children of Israel cried unto the Lord." (Ex. 14:10) It was then that the Holy One blessed be He said, 'For this did I desire - to hear your voices.'<sup>44</sup>

Thus, Pharaoh pursues Israel to meet his own punishment, or, alternatively, to provoke Israel to pray, but in either case the pursuit is engineered by God. Furthermore, as the following midrashim illustrate, God orchestrated the pursuit in such a manner that Pharaoh is neutralized and rendered harmless every step of the way:

"So he made ready his chariot ..." (Ex. 14:6) Pharaoh with his own hands made it ready. It is customary for kings to stand by while others arrange for them the equipment of the chariot and make it ready. But here Pharaoh made ready his chariot and arranged its equipment with his own hands. When the nobles of the kingdom saw him getting up and arranging his own, every one of them got up and arranged his own ... (However, this was to no avail.) Let the work of making the chariot done by Joseph in order to meet his father (Gen. 46:29) come and stand out against the work of making ready the chariot done by Pharaoh in order to go and pursue the Israelites. Another interpretation. R. Simon b. Yohai says: Let the sword and the hand come and stand out against the sword and the hand. Let the sword and the hand used by our father Abraham when

going to slay his son, as it is said, "And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son" (Gen. 22:10), come and stand out against the sword and the hand used by Pharaoh when going to pursue the Israelites, as it is said, "I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them." (Ex. 15:9)<sup>45</sup>

Pharaoh's actions are also matched one for one by God Himself:

Everything that Pharaoh did the Holy One blessed be He did likewise. Pharaoh went out as a soldier;<sup>46</sup> the Holy One blessed be He went out as a soldier, as it says, "The Lord goes forth like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his fury ..." (Isa. 42:13) ... At the time of war He (like Pharaoh) was called "man", as it says, "The Lord is a man of war, the Lord is His name." (Ex. 15:3) Pharaoh went out dressed in tin-plated armor and the Holy One blessed be He did likewise, as it says, "at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear." (Habb. 3:11) Pharaoh went out with stones thrown from a catapult and the Holy One blessed be He went out with hailstone and blocks of ice. Pharaoh rode on a horse and the Holy One blessed be He rode on a cherub, as it says, "He rode on a cherub and flew." (Ps. 18:10) ...<sup>47</sup>

This last example of a one-to-one correspondence between God and Pharaoh has more than a casual significance. As is revealed in a continuation of this source, God's mimicking of Pharaoh in this instance ultimately facilitates Pharaoh's final undoing:

... Pharaoh did not want to enter the sea. What did the Holy One blessed be He do? He rode "on a swift cloud" (Isa. 19:1) and turned into a mare and stood before the soldiers' horses and the horses ran after the mare. The Holy One blessed be He went down into the sea and the horses ran after Him ... (And thus God triumphed) as it says, "And overthrew Pharaoh and his host into the Red Sea." (Ps. 136:15)<sup>48</sup>

Pharaoh finally meets his destruction, a punishment uniquely inspired to fit his crime. As the following sources illustrate, Pharaoh, in the end, is hoisted on his own petard:

... Those who were about to be hung, hung those who wished to hang them, and those who were about to be killed, slew those who wished to slay them. Haman, who wished to kill Mordecai, was himself hung with his children; and Pharaoh, who said, "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river." (Ex. 1:22) was himself cast into the sea, as it says, "Pharaoh's chariots and his host has He cast into the sea." (Ex. 15:4)<sup>49</sup>

The former sages say: Such is the rule obtaining throughout all generations: The scourge with which Israel is smitten will in the end be smitten itself. Let all men learn proper conduct from the case of Amalek. He came to harm Israel but God made him lose the life of this world and the life of the world to come, as it is said, "For I will utterly blot out." (Ex. 17:14) And so also in the case of Pharaoh. He came to harm Israel but God drowned him in the Reed Sea, as it is said, "But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Reed Sea." (Ps. 136:15) Likewise every nation or kingdom that comes to harm Israel God always judges according to this rule. The sages said: With what measure a man metes it is meted unto him, as it is said, "for with the very thing which they acted presumptuously against them." (Ex. 18:11)<sup>50</sup>

Let the wheel (of fortune) turn against them and bring back upon them their own violence. For with the same device with which they planned to destroy Israel I am going to punish them. They planned to destroy My children by water so I will likewise punish them only by water. For it is said, "He makes a pit, digging it out, and falls into the hole which he has made." (Ps. 7:15); "He who digs a pit will fall into it; and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones is hurt by them; and he who splits logs is endangered by them." (Eccl. 10:8-9); "His mischief returns upon his own head ..." (Ps. 7:16); and, "He who digs a pit will fall into it ..." (Prov. 26:27)<sup>51</sup>

From all appearances, then, Pharaoh drowned in the Reed Sea with all the other Egyptians. There are sources, however, which demonstrate that Pharaoh survived not only the tenth plague but this final judgment as well:

"The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen and all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not so much as one of them remained." (Ex. 14:28) - Even Pharaoh (himself did not remain), according to the words of R. Judah, as it says, "The chariots of Pharaoh and his host He cast into the sea." (Ex. 15:4). R. Nehemiah says, Except Pharaoh (i.e., he survived); of him it says, "But for this purpose have I let you live (to show you My power, so that My name be declared great)" (Ex. 9:16) And some say that later on Pharaoh also went down and drowned, as it is said, "For the horse of Pharaoh went into the sea ..." (Ex. 15:19)<sup>52</sup>

According to R. Nehemiah, Pharaoh survived to bear witness to God's greatness. Another explanation is that Pharaoh earned his pardon by repenting of his evil ways. Though other sources examined earlier relate that God had withheld repentance from Pharaoh, in this instance, on the other hand, repentance was not only available but efficacious as well:

"Repentance and good deeds are as a shield against retribution." (Avot 4:11) ... R. Nehunyah b. Hakneh says: Be aware of the strength of repentance. Come and learn it from Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who rebelled greatly against the Most High Rock, as it says, "Who is the Lord that I should hearken to His voice?" (Ex. 5:2) However, with this same expression with which he sinned, with it too did he repent, as it says, "Who is like You among the gods, O Lord?" (Ex. 15:11) (As a reward for Pharaoh's repentance) the Holy One blessed be He saved him from among the dead ...<sup>53</sup>

Pharaoh's contrition achieved more than just saving his own life. Several positive side effects were bestowed on the Egyptians because of Pharaoh's confession of wrong-doing:

The mouth that had said, "And moreover I will not let Israel go." (Ex. 5:2) is the same mouth that said, "I will let you go." (Ex. 8:24). What was the reward for this? "Thou shalt not abhor the Egyptians." (Deut. 23:8) The mouth that had said, "I know not the Lord." is the same mouth that said, "Let us flee before Israel; for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians." (Ex. 14:25) What was



the reward for this? "In that day there shall be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord." (Isa. 19:19) The mouth that had said, "Who is the Lord, that I should hearken to His voice?" is the same mouth that said, "The Lord is righteous and I and my people are wicked." (Ex. 9:27) What reward did they receive for this? A place to be buried in was given to them, as it is said, "You have stretched out Your right hand, the earth swallowed them." (Ex. 15:12)<sup>54</sup>

Thus, at least according to some sources, Pharaoh merited deliverance. Still, this reward was not without its negative component. If only just temporarily, Pharaoh was first punished before he was saved:

Our sages, may their memory be for a blessing, said: At the time when Israel sang this Song (i.e., the Song at the Sea, Ex. 15) before the Holy One blessed be He, Pharaoh, who had gone crazy in the sea, heard it and he lifted his finger to the heavens and said, 'I believe in You, that You are just and I and my people are wicked, and there is no God in the world except You.' At that same moment Gabriel came and hung an iron chain on his neck and said to him, 'O wicked one! Yesterday you said, "Who is the Lord that I should hearken to His voice?" (Ex. 5:2) and now you say "The Lord is just" (Ex. 9:27)? Immediately he brought him down to the depths of the sea and held him there fifty days and afflicted him in order that he would know the wonders of the Holy One blessed be He. (Only) afterwards did he take him up out of the sea ...<sup>55</sup>

Pharaoh's life from this time on followed one of two alternative courses. According to the first, after Gabriel brought Pharaoh up out of the sea he installed him, appropriately, as king of Nineveh:

And Pharaoh went off and ruled over Nineveh. The people of Nineveh would write counterfeit documents, men would rob their neighbors, and a man would come to his neighbor and commit an act of sodomy and other such evil things. When the Holy One blessed be He sent Jonah to

prophesy the destruction of the city Pharaoh heard, rose from his throne, rent his garments, wore sackcloth and ashes, and made proclamation to all his people that everyone should fast for three days and that anyone who did not do these things would be burned in a fire, (as it says, "'let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?' When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way,) God repented of the evil which He said He would do to them (and He did it not.") (Jonah 3:8-10)<sup>56</sup>

This version of the story has Pharaoh emerge a hero in the end. Once a sinner, Pharaoh is now cleansed of his wrongdoings. The Egyptian king, now enthroned in Nineveh, successfully calls upon the wicked Ninevites to repent of their evil ways just as he had apparently done himself.

The other ending of this story is less optimistic than the first. Perhaps it is also more realistic especially with regard to its setting. In this instance Pharaoh is consigned to Hell:

Pharaoh is still alive and stands in the entrance to Gehenna (i.e., Hell). When idol-worshippers enter he immediately informs them of the mighty deeds of the Holy One blessed be He and says to them, 'You fools that you are in the world! Why did you not learn wisdom from the example of what I did and what happened to me? Because I denied the Holy One blessed be He, He sent against me ten plagues. Moreover, he drowned me in the sea and held me there fifty days. Afterwards he took me up out of the sea and only in the end I believed in Him against my will. Therefore Israel sang this song and everyone said, "Who is like You, among the gods? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?"' (Ex. 15:11)<sup>57</sup>

It is unclear from this source whether or not repentance is still available to Pharaoh's audience in Hell. This question is perhaps resolved in another passage. There we learn that



praise of God ascends not only from the mouths of the righteous in Paradise, but that it ascends as well from the mouths of the wicked in Hell. By praising God the wicked may not necessarily secure a release from their imprisonment in Gehenna, but at least their tears of regret can apparently mitigate the very fires of their punishment.<sup>58</sup> It would seem, then, that Pharaoh's rebuking of his audience need not be in vain. This will especially be the case if readers of the midrash will themselves heed Pharaoh's warning to acknowledge God's might while they still have the opportunity to obtain exemption from Hell, a fate perhaps reserved for them too. Moreover, by turning from their evil ways, these repentant sinners secure for themselves a place in heaven. There, among the righteous, they can continue to reap the blessings for praising God and acknowledging God's greatness. Thus, it is written, "You have led in Your steadfast love the people whom You have redeemed, You have guided them by Your strength to Your holy abode." (Ex. 15:13)

## CONCLUSION

The portrait of Pharaoh according to the rabbinic literature is essentially complete. The one remaining concern is to attempt an analysis of the preceding, accumulated material.

As a general observation, the rabbinic treatment of Pharaoh largely echoes the discussion of Pharaoh found in the Bible. For one thing, the crimes attributed to Pharaoh are basically the same in the Bible and the rabbinic literature: Pharaoh enacts harsh decrees on the Israelites; he denies God; he seeks to kill the first-born; he desires to kill Moses for slaying an Egyptian; he hardens his heart; and so on. Likewise, Pharaoh is similarly punished in both literatures: he is afflicted by the plagues, his nation is destroyed, and, seemingly, even he himself is ultimately uprooted, although this last observation is equally unclear in the Bible and the rabbinic literature alike. In any case, there is fundamentally a common portrait of Pharaoh. In both strata Pharaoh is decidedly wicked, a convicted perpetrator of evil.

The rabbinic literature, however, does not simply repeat the Biblical discussion, but rather embellishes upon it. This is the case, for example, in the description of Pharaoh's harsh decrees where Pharaoh is depicted as wearing a brickmold. The description of the frogs actually entering Pharaoh's body is another illustration of this type of elaboration. What is unclear is what motivates these particular embellishments. On the one hand, such statements might be intended as a literary device to achieve hyperbole. On the other hand, the comment

may not be such an exaggeration after all. Rather, it might be a not-so-disguised reference to a contemporary situation of the commentator. However, instead of such a reference being made directly it is retrojected back into the Biblical era. A discerning reader would nonetheless recognize the true subject of the comment. Pharaoh's decree to bury alive the Israelites who were unable to fill their daily quota of bricks is an example of such a comment that is open for interpretation. It is uncertain whether this passage is designed simply to accentuate Pharaoh's depravity. Alternatively, this so-called "embellishment" might in fact be a veiled comment which really refers to a contemporary of the rabbinic commentator, a contemporary ruler who was so depraved himself.

Ultimately, most conclusions of this latter sort are at best educated conjectures. However, there are a number of instances in the rabbinic literature which diverge so greatly from the Biblical account that they almost necessarily betray a secondary reference. These rabbinic comments are supported by Biblical sources only tenuously and unless they are simply fabrications out of whole cloth, motivated strictly by literary considerations, then they can only be explained in terms of the contemporary situation in which the rabbis were writing. Comments of this sort which particularly capture our attention are the following: Pharaoh's leprosy; Pharaoh's sexual crimes; Pharaoh's divinity; Moses and Aaron's first encounter with Pharaoh; and, finally, the general portrait of one eternal Pharaoh as opposed to a succession of rulers.

The context which these rabbinic comments perhaps refer to is the experience of the Jews in Roman Egypt. Moses Aberbach explains this connection:

Rabbinic references to the biblical Egyptians are almost invariably hostile and they are probably strongly colored by the unfortunate experiences of the Jews in Roman Egypt. Ancient Alexandria was the birthplace of racial anti-Semitism and the scene of major pogroms in 38, 66, 116-117 C.E. Egyptian Jewry outside of Alexandria was massacred toward the end of Trajan's reign. The Egyptians, even more than the Greeks, were, according to Josephus, the Jews' bitterest enemies and the originators of the worst libels against them.<sup>1</sup>

With this setting in mind, some of the rabbinic comments take on a new significance. This is the case, for example, with regard to Pharaoh's leprosy. As Aberbach writes, "the leper motif was probably a literary vengeance for the Egyptian calumny that the Israelites of the Exodus were lepers while the slaughter of the Hebrew children in Egypt" - so that Pharaoh could bathe in their blood - "evidently alludes to the atrocities committed in the course of the Jewish uprising and its suppression in 116-117 C.E."<sup>2</sup> Aberbach explains Pharaoh's sexual crimes along similar lines: "Egyptian immorality is a constantly recurring theme in rabbinic literature, due presumably to actual observation of the contemporary Egyptian scene."<sup>3</sup>

A number of the other rabbinic comments become more intelligible when considered in terms of the reign of the Roman emperor Caligula. Pharaoh's self-proclaimed divinity is likely modeled on the similar presumption of this Roman emperor. Caligula not only considered himself divine, but was the only emperor who made an "attempt to compel the Jewish nation to

accept emperor worship."<sup>4</sup> Caligula issued a decree to erect a statue of himself in the sanctuary in Jerusalem, but because of Caligula's death the decree was never carried out. Prior to the emperor's death, however, the Jewish philosopher Philo led a delegation to Rome to seek redress from Caligula, but was dismissed without an answer.<sup>5</sup> The Greeks also sent a deputation led by Apion.<sup>6</sup> What is striking about these incidents is that they are very reminiscent of Moses and Aaron's first encounter with Pharaoh. The similarity is even more clear when we recall that in the midrash Pharaoh is referred to as Cosmocrator, a title for Roman Emperor.<sup>7</sup> Graetz's reconstruction of the episode is the most uncanny of all when it comes to instilling a feeling of deja vu. Graetz's comments might as easily be about Moses, Aaron, and Pharaoh as they are about Philo and Caligula:

The Judean envoys were hardly permitted to speak when they were admitted to the imperial presence, and Caligula's first word was one of jarring reproof: "So you are the despisers of God, who will not recognize me as the deity, but who prefer worshipping a nameless one, whilst all my subjects have accepted me as their god." ... Later on when he dismissed the Judean envoys, he remarked that they seemed less wicked than stupid in not being willing to acknowledge his divinity.<sup>8</sup>

As for the general rabbinic picture of one eternal Pharaoh as opposed to a multiplicity of rulers, this too might be interpreted in light of the contemporary situation of the rabbis. As was suggested in chapter one, by removing Pharaoh from a specific historical setting the Egyptian ruler becomes a timeless symbol, an archetype of the eternal enemy. Thus, Pharaoh no longer solely represents for the rabbis the ruler who en-



slaved the Hebrews in Egypt. Rather, Pharaoh is treated by the rabbinic commentators as synonymous with the Persian rulers or Roman emperors in their own day.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, this symbolic use of Pharaoh is by no means restricted to the rabbinic period. As is clear from the Haggadah for Passover the evil ruler Pharaoh is alive in every age: "For more than one enemy has risen against us to destroy us. In every generation, in every age, some rise up to plot our annihilation. But a Divine Power sustains and delivers us."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, one last observation should be made about the differences within the rabbinic literature itself. Most striking of course are the various opinions regarding Pharaoh's demise, whether he did or did not drown, and, if he did not, whether he went to Nineveh or to Hell. At first glance these different outcomes might seem inconsistent, but perhaps they are intended to teach different lessons. On the one hand, Pharaoh's drowning, never clearly stated in the Book of Exodus, is the ultimate expression of the rabbis' hostility for Pharaoh and for all that he represents. It is also a warning against other evil-doers to repent while they still have the opportunity. On the other hand, Pharaoh's deliverance, as it were, might represent some conciliatory spirit on the part of the rabbis, for, despite all his incorrigible evil, Pharaoh was still to be treated with the respect due to royalty. In this regard, Pharaoh's deliverance really says less about Pharaoh than it does about the magnanimity of God.



From another perspective, however, Pharaoh's survival reveals that the rabbis took a realistic outlook on life. The rabbis knew, just as we know today, that evil was not vanquished once and for all when God redeemed Israel from bondage and destroyed Egypt. Pharaoh may have been drowned, but like the phoenix which rose from its ashes, so too, Pharaoh rose from the depths of the sea to renew his havoc on the world.

Still, though evil, imperfection and disorder are all around us, before our eyes is a vision of harmony, peace and goodness in a world redeemed. We await the final redemption. Then once more we shall sing with one accord as Israel sang at the shores of the sea: "Who is like You, Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders? ... The Lord shall reign forever and ever." (Ex. 15:11, 18)

## NOTES

### ABBREVIATIONS

ARN	-	Avot de-Rabbi Natan
BR	-	Bemidbar Rabbah
BrR	-	Bereshit Rabbah
DR	-	Devarim Rabbah
EJ	-	Encyclopedia Judaica
ER	-	Seder Eliyahu Rabbah
IB	-	The Interpreter's Bible
IDB	-	The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
KR	-	Kohelet Rabbah
Mek.	-	Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, eds. Horovitz and Rabin
Mek. RS	-	Mekhilta de-Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai
MHG	-	Midrash Ha-Gadol
PK	-	Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, ed. Mandelbaum
PR	-	Pesikta Rabbati de-Rab Kahana
PRE	-	Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer
RSV	-	Revised Standard Version, Oxford Annotated Bible
ShR	-	Shemot Rabbah
SSR	-	Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah
Tan.	-	Tanhuma, ed. Zundel
Tan. B.	-	Tanhuma, ed. Buber
VR	-	Vayikra Rabbah
VY	-	Midrash Va-Yosha

All Midrash Rabbah references are from the Vilna edition.

All Talmudic references are from Talmud Bavli, Standard Edition.

## INTRODUCTION

1. New Yorker, 25 December 1978, p. 11.

## CHAPTER I

1. J.A. Wilson, "Pharaoh," IDB, 3:774.
2. RSV, p. 53.
3. Ibid., p. 67 (note on Ex. 1:8); p. 82 (note on Ex. 12:40).
4. VY, p. 27.
5. PRE 43; VY, pp. 26-7.
6. Tan. Shemot 5; ShR 1:8.
7. Sota 11a.
8. Tan. Shemot 5; cf. Tan. B. II:4; ShR 1:8; and Sota 11a which express a dissenting view.
9. Tan. Shemot 5; cf. MHG II:6-7.
10. ShR 1:34.
11. VR 16:1; cf. BrR 40:2; Ketubot 77b.
12. ShR 1:8; Sota 11a.
13. Mek. Beshallah Amalek 2:187; cf. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 6:110; ShR 3:8, 15:27.

## CHAPTER 2

### Introduction

1. Mek. RS, pp. 3-4.

### Part 1

2. Sota 11b.
3. ShR 1:18.
4. Mek. Beshallah Shira 7:140.
5. Tan. Va-Yiggash 5.

6. BrR 93:6.
7. Ibid., 52:13.
8. Sota 11a; cf. BR 15:20.
9. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:88-9.
10. BR 15:20.
11. ShR 1:12.
12. Ibid., 1:28.
13. Ibid., 5:18.
14. Ibid., 1:12.
15. Ibid., 1:14.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., cf. Sota 11b; BrR 17:8.
18. Sota 11a.
19. MHG II:12.
20. ER 8.
21. ShR 1:34.
22. Sota 12a.
23. Tan. Va-Yakkel 4; cf. Tan. B. II:22.

#### Part 2

24. Mek. Beshallah Shira 6:136.
25. ShR 5:14; cf. MHG II:43; Tan. Va-Era 5; Tan. B. II:19.
26. ShR 5:14; cf. Tan. Va-Era 5; Tan. B. II:19.
27. ShR 5:14; Tan. Va-Era 5; Tan. B. II:19.
28. ShR 5:14; cf. VY, p. 8. Re Pharaoh and the Nile see BrR 84:3, 4; Tan. B. I:190; KR 5:2.
29. ShR 8:2; cf. Mek. Beshallah Shira 8:142-3.
30. Mek. Beshallah Shira 8:142-3.

31. Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 59; RSV, p. 73; IB, 1:888f.
32. ShR 9:1; cf. Tan. B. II:28.
33. Tan. B. II:27-8.
34. ShR 9:6.
35. Ibid., 9:7; Menahot 85a.
36. ShR 9:7.
37. Ibid., 9:6; cf. Tan. Va-Era 3; Tan. B. II:27-8.
38. ShR 9:7.
39. MHG II:12; cf. BrR 89:6.
40. Sota 12b.
41. Sanhedrin 101b.
42. Sota 12b. The 'waters of Meribah' - literally, the waters of contention - refer to the incident in Num. 20:2-13 when Moses was ordered by God to strike the rock to bring forth water for the Israelite people. Moses, however, not only doubted the efficacy of this act, but, moreover, announced his skepticism publicly to the people. God, in turn, punished Moses for his disbelief by decreeing that Moses could not lead the people into the promised land, hence his defeat on account of water.
43. Sota 11a. No Biblical sources justify linking Balaam, Job, and Jethro neither together alone, nor together with Pharaoh. Most likely, the association, though it reflects on Pharaoh, is more probably motivated by the information it yields regarding the advisors. Their fate is explained by linking their final destiny to this particular precipitating event which had occurred earlier in their lives.
44. ShR 1:26; cf. Tan. Shemot 8.
45. Ibid.
46. ShR 1:26.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 1:29; cf. ShR 1:28, 30, 31, 5:20; Tan. Shemot 10.
51. DR 2:26-7.
52. Tan. Shemot 10.
53. ShR 1:31. The word עָקַב', 'he sought,' is possibly read instead as עָקַב' , that is, 'ten times he sought,' thus explaining why he struck him ten times.
54. DR 2:26-7.
55. ShR 1:31; cf. DR 2:26-7. This version treats the word "Moses" in the phrase "And Moses fled from Pharaoh" וַיִּקְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפָּרֹחַ as superfluous. Since it is obvious that Moses was the one sought after the verse could easily have read "And he fled from Pharaoh" וַיִּקְרַח . Consequently, the word "Moses" is present for a purpose, namely, to accent the fact that it was he who was the one who fled from Pharaoh, thereby implying that someone else, namely, the angel, was not the one who did the fleeing. See Midrash Rabbah, ed. Moshe Mirkin (Tel Aviv: "Yavneh" Publishing House, 1972) 5:48, note on ShR 1:31.
56. ShR 1:31.
57. Ibid., 9:4.
58. ER 16.

### CH/ PTER III

#### Introduction

1. ShR 20:7.
2. Ibid., 7:3; cf. BrR 89:9; ShR 15:15; Mek. Bo Pisha 13:45; Zevahim 102a.
3. ARN 27.

#### Part 1

4. PK 11:4.
5. ShR 18:5.
6. Ibid., 6:2.
7. Tan. Va-Era 14; cf. ShR 20:10; Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 6:110, Beshallah Amalek 2:181-2.



8. ShR 9:10; cf. ShR 9:9.
9. Sota 11a; cf. ShR 10:3, 11:3; Tan. Va-Era 14; Mek. Bo Pisha 7:23, Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:85.
10. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:85.
11. ShR 12:1.
12. Ibid., 10:2.
13. Tan. Va-Era 14; cf. ShR 9:8, 11:1; MHG II:61.
14. MHG II:67.
15. ShR 8:1.
16. Mek. Beshallah Shira 5:133-4.
17. ShR 12:1.
18. Tan. Va-Era 14; cf. Tan. B. II:35; ShR 9:9.
19. ShR 9:11; cf. MHG II:62.
20. MHG II:64.
21. ShR 10:5.
22. Ibid., 15:10.
23. Ibid., 10:6; cf. ShR 12:7, 9:8; Tan. B. II:37.
24. ShR 12:5.
25. Ibid., 11:6; cf. ShR 11:1, 13:3; Tan. Va-Era 3; MHG II:31.
26. ShR 13:3.
27. MHG II:31; cf. MHG II:68.

#### Part 2

28. ShR 18:1.
29. Ibid.
30. Tan. B. II:51-2; cf. ShR 18:10; PR 17:5; PK 7:7; MHG II:87; VY, p. 24.
31. PR 17:5; cf. PK 7:7; MHG II:87; VY, p. 24.

32. ShR 18:3; cf. ShR 20:4; PR 17:5; PK 7:7.
33. Mek. RS, pp. 22-3; Mek. Bo Pisha 13:43.
34. Ibid.
35. ShR 18:4.
36. Tan. B. II:52-3; cf. Mek. Bo Pisha 13:44-5; ShR 18:10, VY, pp. 18-9.
37. BrR 41:3; ShR 20:1, 2, 5, 8, 9.
38. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:87-8.
39. Ibid., Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:86.
40. ShR 20:3; cf. PR 19:1; Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi Petichta: 75.
41. Mek. Beshallah Shira 7:139-140.
42. Ibid., Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:85; cf. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:90.
43. ShR 20:12.
44. Ibid., 21:5; cf. Tan. Shofetim 14; SSR II:14,2.
45. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:88; cf. BrR 55:8. The rabbinic literature mentions several other instances of one-to-one correspondences which relate to our subject. For example, the four expressions of redemption (Ex. 6:6-7), traditionally associated with the four cups of wine to be drunk during the Passover Seder, also correspond to the four decrees which Pharaoh issued regarding the Israelites. See ShR 6:4; cf. ShR 1:12; BrR 88:5. Another example is the quote attributed to R. Tarfon: The same night that Sarah, our mother, was taken (by Pharaoh), that night was the eve of Passover, and the Holy One blessed be He brought great plagues on Pharaoh and on his house to make it known that he would similarly smite Egypt with great plagues in the future, as it says, "and the Lord smote with great plagues." (Gen. 12:17) See PRE 26; cf. MHG I:208-9. Finally, R. Hanina b. Papa said: That day (i.e., when Moses was cast into the sea) was the 21st of Nisan (i.e., the same day on which the Egyptians were drowned). See Sota 12b.
46. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:89-90.
47. Tan. Shofetim 14; cf. Mek. RS, pp. 51-2; Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 6:b12; SSR I:9,4.

48. Tan. Shofetim 14; cf. SSR I:9,4.
49. ShR 20:10.
50. Mek. Beshallah Amalek 2:181-2.
51. Ibid., Beshallah Va-Yehi 6:110; cf. ShR 3:8, 15:27, 23:9; KR 10:8; Mek. Beshallah Shira 2:121, 123, 4:131-2, 5:133, Beshallah Va-Yehi 1:90.
52. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi 6:111; cf. Mek. RS, p. 54.
53. PRE 43.
54. Mek. Beshallah Va-Yehi Petichta:75; Mek. RS, p. 24.
55. VY, p. 27.
56. PRE 43; cf. VY, pp. 26-7.
57. VY, p. 27.
58. ShR 7:4.

#### CONCLUSION

1. Moses Aberbach, "Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the Aggadah," EJ, 13:360.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 362.
4. Isaiah Gafni, "Emperor Worship," EJ, 6:729; M. Cary, A History of Rome (New York; St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 544; Cyril Bailey, Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1932), pp. 138-143.
5. Cary, p. 544.
6. Heinrich Graetz, History of the Jews (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1974), II:186.
7. ShR 5:14.
8. Graetz, II:187.
9. Moed Katan 18a; ShR 5:14.
10. The New Union Haggadah (New York: The Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), p. 45.

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