

Learning How to Talk About the Gods in the Bible

By Jim Myers

Exploring the [Stories of the Ten Commandments](#) teaches us how to talk about “**the gods**” in those stories. I know that words “**the gods**” sounds strange to Christians and Jews today, but keep in mind that neither *Christianity* nor *Rabbinic Judaism* existed when the *Torah scroll*, which contains the books of *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*, was written. If you haven't bookmarked or downloaded my handout with the [Five Versions of the Ten Sayings and Commandments](#) ([CLICK HERE](#)).

The First Story

The *First Story of the Ten Commandments* is found in Exodus 20:1-17. Below is the Exodus 20:1-2 from the *New King James Translation* (1983).

And **God** spoke all these words, saying:
“I am the **LORD** your **God**, who brought you out of
the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

The three underlined words reflect the theologies of the translators, instead of the meanings of the Hebrew words written in the ancient Torah scroll.

Biblical Heritage Explorers use the guidelines below when they explore biblical texts.

1. *My belief system will be large enough to include all facts.*
2. *Words must be viewed and understood within the contexts in which they appear.*

If your exploring team has Christians, Jews, atheists, and few agnostics on it, team members will be reminded if they accidentally insert their personal beliefs into the story. In order to attach the ancient author's meaning to the Hebrew words of the Torah we first identify two contexts – the **immediate context** (*Exodus 19 & 20*) and the **larger context** (*Genesis 1:1 – Exodus 20:17*).

The Hebrew word **ELOHIYM** was translated “**God**” in the *New King James Translation*. The meaning of **ELOHIYM** is found in the *first story* in Genesis (1:1-4a). **ELOHIYM** is the name of a type of entity – **a god** – which is different from the other types of entities in that story – *water creatures, winged creatures, animals, and humans*.

The Hebrew word **YHVH** was translated “**LORD**” in the *New King James Translation*. The meaning of **YHVH** is found in the *second story* in Genesis (2:4b-3:24). **YHVH** is the name of an **ELOHIYM**. I translate **YHVH** by using a *euphemism*, “**Yahweh**”, which is not a transliteration of the actual Hebrew word in the ancient text. I use the *euphemism* to remind readers that **the Hebrew word YHVH is a specific name of one ELOHIYM**. Now you will be able to understand my translation of Exodus 20:1-3.

And **a god** spoke all these words, saying:
“I am **Yahweh** your **god**, who brought you out of
the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”
You shall have no other **gods** before Me.

Some scholars conclude that the tribes of Israel had been in Egypt for 430 years, while others argue it was 215 years. Either way, Yahweh was speaking to people who had lived their entire lives in Egypt – *except for Moses*. He lived in Egypt for 40 years as a member of Pharaoh’s family. Then he lived for 40 years, as the son-in-law of Jethro, also called Reuel, **priest of Midian** of the Kenite clan.

- How many gods were part of the lives of the Egyptians with whom Moses and the members of the tribes of Israel lived?
- How many gods were part of the lives of the Kenite clan with whom Moses lived?
- How involved were Moses and the tribes of Israel with those gods?

Long before Moses was born, during the time of Joseph, we read about two events that were closely linked to Egyptian gods.

Joseph commanded **his servants the healers to embalm** his father.
So the healers embalmed Israel.
Now forty days were required for it,
for such is the period required for embalming.
And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.
Genesis 50:2-3

So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years;
and **he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt**.
Genesis 50:26

The **Egyptian god Anubis** was the god of embalming. The “healers” in the text above are the funerary priests wore a mask of the god **Anubis** during the mummification process, symbolically becoming the god during those rituals. The purpose of mummification in Egypt was to keep the body intact so it could be transported to a spiritual afterlife.

This information was recorded in Egyptian texts that were written long before the Torah was written. The reason I included it here is because I used to read the words from Exodus 20 as a warning to the Israelites about gods they will encounter as they travel to their new homeland. Now I read it as a warning to the Israelites about gods they already knew about. Yahweh will address the other gods in Exodus 34.

The bottom line is “**monotheism**” would have sounded as strange to the Israelites as “**polytheism**” sounds to most of us.

This exploration also makes us aware of our own belief models linked to God and helps us examine them.