

Learning How to Talk About the Gods in the Bible

Part 2

By Jim Myers

In Exodus 20, when Yahweh warned the Israelites about placing no gods before Him, it was at the beginning of the exodus from Egypt. When the Israelites first entered Egypt they had no homeland, temple, religious texts, etc. The Israelites had lived as strangers in the land of the Canaanites. When the tribes of Israel first arrived in Egypt, unknown to them, their brother Joseph held the second most powerful political position in Egypt. He had saved the Egyptians from being destroyed by the famine. Joseph's wife was the daughter of a powerful Egyptian priest. Even though Joseph was faithful to Yahweh, he became very familiar with the Egyptian gods and was thus introduced to one of Egypt's most important beliefs – *the afterlife*.

Some years after Joseph died, a new pharaoh rose to power who knew nothing about him. Until then the Israelites had remained in Egypt and lived peacefully among the Egyptians. But when the new pharaoh took power -- he enslaved the Israelites. That was when Moses was born, placed in a basket in the Nile River, and found by the pharaoh's daughter. Moses was raised in the House of Pharaoh as a grandson the pharaoh. Moses was immersed in the Egyptian culture for 40 years and thus would have been very familiar with the Egyptian gods - - *and their beliefs about the afterlife*.

Therefore, two major Israelite figures were like bookends for the time the tribes of Israel were in Egypt – *Joseph at the beginning and Moses at the end*. **Both were members of the elite power class that ruled Egypt**. As I will discuss in a future email, the words in Exodus 20 sound very similar to words found in Egyptian texts, especially the *Egyptian Book of Dead*. But now, I want the focus to be on one of the defining principles of **Yahweh's relationship with the people of Israel**:

*I am your god;
you shall not place any other god between Me and you!*

This why we concluded that Exodus 20 addressed the gods that the Israelites left behind in Egypt. Yahweh wanted to make sure those gods would not be part of their new homeland – *the land that Yahweh promised Abraham*.

Now let's jump to the second text linked to the Ten Commandments – *Exodus 34*. Here, Yahweh focuses on the gods the Israelites will encounter when they enter their new homeland – *which had been the homeland of the Canaanites and others long before Abraham arrived there*. The following excerpts are from Exodus 34:10-17.

- *Yahweh said: "Behold, I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of Yahweh. For it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.*
- Observe (and do) what I command you this day.

- *I am driving out from before you the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.*
- *Take heed to yourself, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst.*
- *Destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images for you shall not bow down to any other god.*
- *Yahweh, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous god, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and the inhabitants play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods.*
- *You shall make no molded gods for yourselves.*

Yahweh has now covered all of the gods in the areas where the Israelites lived before the exodus and the land they will live in. After they enter their new homeland, Israel's greatest failures in the future will be linked to relationships with other gods or failing to follow Yahweh's instructions and commandments.

Very few Christians understand this. They were taught monotheism existed from the first verse in the Bible (Genesis 1:1) -- *this is not true.*

- *Monotheism was unknown in both the Old and New Testament Periods.*
- *Other nations have always had other gods.*
- *Other gods have also been in the Land of Israel.*
- *Yahweh made it very clear that He is a jealous god.*

In the Jewish Hebrew Scriptures, knowing the name of your god is one of the most important responsibilities humans have. That is why the first **Jewish Sayings** is:

*I am **Yahweh your god**
who brought you out of the
land of Egypt, the house of bondage.*

Gods were part of everyday life in the ancient world. However, for the people of Israel, being faithful to the god that brought them out of the house of bondage in Egypt was their top priority.