

Was God being evil when He killed all the firstborn in Egypt?

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I got this question a while back and made an initial reply back in 2003:

Pharaoh was holding Moses and his people captive, and doing really nasty things to them. God tells Pharaoh to let his people go, but Pharaoh says no. To show Pharaoh that he means business, God retaliates by killing thousands of first born children (and adults that were first borns too I guess). I'll stick to the children though. I'm assuming some firstborns were young. Anyway, many of those children had nothing to do with the slavery and atrocities committed by the Egyptian rulers. It's a lot like being punished for something someone else does.

My question would be then, why would I want to worship a vengeful God who slaughters innocent children?

More recently, I got an email that took exception with my argument (although I am not sure they read all of it, nor understood it all). Here are the relevant points for this version:

"It doesn't matter if God killed just 1 first born or all the first born males... They weren't in command, Pharaoh was. ... Two wrongs does not make a right... If God should have killed anyone, it should had been Pharaoh despite the fact that every time the Pharaoh wanted to let the chosen people go, God hardened his heart!... . Because Pharaoh ordered his people to kill all these innocent Hebrew children, it's okay for God to stoop to Pharaoh's level and do so also."

As in many of the skeptical questions I get, the conclusion they end up with is often correct *in some basic sense* (i.e., 'we should not want to worship a vengeful God who -- maliciously--slaughters innocent children instead of the guilty party'), but the reasoning which leads up to the conclusion *that this applies to the biblical God* is flawed. In other words, their ethics are okay, but their understanding of the historical and philosophical situation is inaccurate.

And--very often--the terms they use to describe the situation are imprecise, and need more refinement and clarity. Nuances and emotional overtones can be seriously misleading.

- For example, "**vengeful**" to a modern reader sounds like someone is consumed by and/or enslaved to a revenge-centered passion. But to the biblical participant, 'vengeance' is strictly a 'passion for true justice--both social and ethical' (see the

article "*God is Wrathful, Vengeful, Jealous, and Angry every day--and you want me to have a relationship with Him?!*" at <http://cttx.org/madgod.html>; and "*What God considered worthy of vengeance*" at <http://cttx.org/deliver.html>). And even then, in such judgement, God considers this 'unnatural' for him--it is called His 'strange work'. He has no pleasure in the death of anyone. He is the author of life, and the enemy of death.

- Or take "**slaughter**". To a modern hearer, it has the dictionary connotations of slashing throats for butchering livestock for food, for killing in a brutal or violent manner (unlike dying in one's sleep), massive indiscriminate killing (i.e. carnage of war). That is nothing like the very limited (3% of the population) and very selective (e.g., firstborn males, not head-of-household) and very humane (death while sleeping) deaths of humans.
- And take "**innocent**". This word suggests that there is somehow a 'merit' issue involved--that only "guilty" people should be forced to die before they "get old". It suggests (via nuance or connotation) that there should be a linear correlation between life span and morality, when even the Bible consistently points out that the 'wicked' often live long, satisfying lives--at the expense of the righteous and/or poor. It suggests that God is somehow "obligated" to keep everyone alive to some statistical average age. Or that the countless children who have died from natural causes in infancy or in minority over the millennia were somehow 'wronged' by God--in spite of their innocence. We feel grief and violation and shock and a sense of imbalance/injustice when such occurs, but there is no solid logic for believing that a breach of ethics has occurred. God expresses grief about even judgments on the wicked when death or tragedy is inflicted on them in His judgment--even when we might not (See His weeping over His judgment on Moab in Jeremiah 48:29-33). When a drunk driver kills an innocent bystander, that tragedy is almost never considered a punishment on the victim. I have pointed out the logical and practical problems with such a proposal in "*How can God allow natural evil to occur?*" at natevl.html. Death does not come only to the 'guilty', and it generally is not considered punishment on a person except in a limited number of cases (and then mostly as 'consequences' and not 'punishment'--e.g. drinking while driving, bad personal habits).

So, we must attempt a clarity of vocabulary and argument to avoid the extremes of either inflammatory slander or facile justifications.

So, let's now go through the material:

- **One:** The passages/texts themselves
- **Two:** The historical context of the oppression of the Israelites
- **Three:** The theological decision/action by God about the first-born
- **Four:** The role and accountability of Pharaoh for these consequences
- **Five:** The moral elements involved: innocence and consequences, reciprocity and blame

- *Pushback: God-as-judge versus God-as-peer -- the '2 wrongs don't make a right' and 'why not kill only Pharaoh?' questions*
- *Pushback: Did God just force -- via 'hardening' -- Pharaoh, in order to provide a pretext for this action?*
- **Six:** Comparing the scale of the oppression and the scale of the first-born deaths

One: The passages/texts themselves.

The promise of the Tenth Plague (Ex 11.4ff):

*Moses said, "Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. 5 **Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die**, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and **all the firstborn of the livestock**. 6 Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. 7 But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites—not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. 8 Then all these officials of yours shall come down to me, and bow low to me, saying, 'Leave us, you and all the people who follow you.' After that I will leave." And in hot anger he left Pharaoh.*

The execution of the Plague (Ex 12.29ff):

*At midnight the **Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt**, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and **all the firstborn of the livestock**. 30 Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for **there was not a house without someone dead** [lit: "**a dead male something**"]. 31 Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said. 32 Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!"*

Two: The historical context of the oppression of the Israelites

The biblical narratives and descriptions of the backdrop leading up to this traumatic action focus on three items: a **long-term oppression** of Israel, an **intense oppression** of Israel, and oppression as an **action of the entire nation** of Egypt (and not solely of/by Pharaoh).

These three elements are intertwined in the narratives and show up in a large number of biblical texts:

Even as far back as the prophecy to Abram about this in Genesis 15:13-14, it was the entire nation that was to be judged: "*Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be **afflicted for four hundred years**. 14 But I will bring **judgment on the nation** that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions"*".

It is the entire nation that is 'guilty' for the oppression and it had been a continual and escalating program for some of the 4 centuries. It began within a few decades of Israel's entry into Egypt and we have no record of it ever stopping. It included a **consistent program of infanticide, commanded upon ALL Egyptians** and not just implemented by the then-current Pharaoh and his court (from Exodus 1):

*Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, **let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase** and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them **to oppress them with forced labor**. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. **But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied** and spread, so that the Egyptians came to **dread** the Israelites. The **Egyptians** became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.*

*The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, **if it is a boy, kill him**; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, **but they let the boys live**. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. **Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."***

Let's make some observations from this text:

1. This Pharaoh is attempting actual population control, *not* simple domination. The specific mention of 'lest they increase', means that the initial attempt to reduce Israelite population was by forced labor. This was specifically designed—according to the text—to limit population growth (and/or reduce population numbers). Think about this for a second—how would hard labor

reduce fertility or reduce population? Answer: *by working the men/women to death* (or miscarriage, in some cases). This is not simple execution, but an incredibly torturous means of killing off fertile males and females! This is not contraception—it is the labor-death-camps mentality.... authorized and instigated by the leader of Egypt.

2. When this doesn't work, Pharaoh resorts to infanticide, via the Hebrew midwives. This ploy doesn't work, so he escalates the program.

"In response to the failure of his scheme, the pharaoh resorts to unrestrained cruelty. In addition to the harsh burdens he imposes on the adult males, he now issues a decree of crushing barbarity: infanticide, in order to reduce the Israelite population."

[Nahum M. Sarna, Exodus (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 7.]

3. The final stage is **full-court infanticide**. All the Egyptians (including slave-girls...) would have been involved in this program. Every Egyptian household would have been legally obligated to kill all male babies of the Hebrews upon birth, by drowning. There is no reason to believe they all did this (nor even had opportunity to do so), of course, but the text does indicate that all the Egyptians feared Pharaoh, including his officials.

"All else having failed, the pharaoh promulgates one last genocidal decree. He mobilizes "all his people," the entire apparatus of the state, to annihilate the people of Israel." [Nahum M. Sarna, Exodus (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 8.]

4. We note from extra-biblical evidence Egypt was 'famous' for its anti-Asiatic bigotry, military actions, and hatred--throughout its early history:

"A limited number of **Old Kingdom** biographical records bearing reference to Egyptian encounters with foreign people and countries provides us with a better perspective of the official image presented above. In the autobiography of Weni, a high official of the Sixth Dynasty, the expedition to the land of the Asiatics was described as the heroic annihilation of the foes and the destruction of villages and settlements [AEL1, 20]:

This army returned in safety, It had ravaged the Sand-dwellers' land.

This army returned in safety, It had flattened the sand-dwellers' land.

This army returned in safety, It had sacked its strongholds.

This army returned in safety, It had cut down its figs, its vines.

This army returned in safety, It had thrown fire in all its [mansions].

This army returned in safety, It had slain its troops by many ten-thousands.

This army returned in safety, [It had carried] off many [troops] as captives.

"It is useless to try to decide if this poetic expression of military success was exaggerated or indeed true at all. The more significant point is that this paean clearly demonstrates a hostile attitude toward the people of the Syrio-Palestinian area. It was **not enough to defeat foreign troops; it was necessary to ravage their land and destroy their crops.**" [HI:EOC, 71-72]

"The collective Egyptian animosity toward the Nubians and **other foreign people** is also shown by the so-called execration texts found at Giza, dates as early as the Sixth Dynasty. These are small clay figurines on which were written the names of the enemies, **many of them west Semitic**, which were subsequently smashed as a magical act to inflict harm on the names. Similar objects with the same intention are found in the Middle Kingdom period. For unknown reasons, the Egyptians found it necessary to confront and to destroy certain foreign people with this extreme measure." [HI:EOC, 73]

In the **Middle Kingdom**, the equation of Asiatics and animals were made:

I subdued lions, I captured crocodiles,

I repressed those of Wawat,

I captured the Medjai,

I made the Asiatics do the dog walk." (AEL1:137)

"Here the foreigners are mentioned in the same class as wild animals. **This animal-foreigner equation** is further demonstrated in a text designated as "The Satire of the Trades: "The courier goes into the desert...fearful of lions and Asiatic..." [HI:EOC, 74]

Ditto for the **New Kingdom**:

"The confrontations between Egypt and other parts of the Near East became a more prominent political phenomenon during the **New Kingdom period**...In terms of official attitude--that is, expressions found in royal inscriptions and figurative representations, as well as biographical texts of the officials--the foreigners, particularly those from the Syrio-Palestinian area, are as a group often referred to as *'3m hsi*, "**the vile Asiatics**." The interpretation of the adjective *hsi* has been the subject of debate...Suffice it to say that this common usage of *hsi* expresses the prevailing attitude that foreigners were, or were perceived through political and theological viewpoints as, inevitably, **in a defeated and downtrodden position in relation to the Egyptians**...To give one example, on the funerary furniture of Tutankhamun, one of the least significant kings of the New Kingdom period in terms of military action, **scenes of the slaughtering of Syrians** and Nubians and captives of Nubians and Asiatics are depicted." [HI:EOC, 75]

One reference to 'vile Asiatic' shows up in a description of their Bedouin-like existence and social outcast life style:

"An Egyptian text, the Instruction for King Merikare (Papyrus St. Petersburg 1116A), composed in the First Intermediate Period or possibly in the Middle Kingdom, describes environmental conditions that find parallels in South Sinai: "The **vile Asiatic** is miserable because of the place wherein he is, shortage of water, lack of many trees, and the paths thereof difficult because of the mountains" (Tobin 2003: 152-53, 161). This inscription provides further **ancient Egyptian views of the Bedouins and their aggression**: "He has never settled in one place, but plagued by want, he wanders the desert on foot. He has been fighting ever since the time of Horus. He neither conquers nor can he be conquered. He does not announce the day of fighting, but is **like a thief whom society has expelled**" (Tobin 2003: 161)" [Gregory Mumford, "Tell Ras Budran (Site 345): Defining Egypt's Eastern Frontier and Mining Operations in South Sinai during the Late Old Kingdom (Early EB IV/MB I)," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research (May), no. 342 (2006): 55.]

This view of the Hebrews was not new to Moses' time, but was present in the biblical record as far back as the Joseph narratives (Gen 43:32):

*"They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the **Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.**"*

"The Egyptian aversion to eating with foreigners is well attested in classical sources, such as Herodotus, Diodorus, Strabo listed by Dillmann. Here a very strong term is used: הַבְּעוּת "disgusting" is often translated "abomination" in religious texts that describe practices totally abhorrent to God (e.g., Lev 18:22, 26, 29). Other customs regarded as "disgusting" by the Egyptians are mentioned in 46:34 and Exod 8:22(26)." [Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 16–50 (vol. 2; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 423.]

"The Egyptians considered **all other peoples barbarians**. Thus they would not associate with them directly by eating at the same table. Joseph's meal was also separated from both the Egyptians and the sons of Jacob because of his high rank." [BBCOT]

Much of Egypt's contempt for foreigners was based on their own self-assured 'superiority' in all areas-- including morality!!

K. L. Younger documents this closely in discussing their view of 'enemies' [K. Lawson Younger Jr., Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing (vol. 98; Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 177ff]:

"From Egyptian literature (e.g. Merikare and The Admonitions of Ipuwer) it is quite evident that the Egyptians had '**an intense hatred** for their foreign neighbors'. Without much variation over the years, both Egyptian art and literature record the relationship between Egypt and her neighbors. Many of the motifs **continue for millennia**. O'Connor explains it in these terms:

'Another important continuity was the **Egyptian attitude to foreigners**. By the New Kingdom centuries of successful military and quasi-military commercial activities in neighbouring regions had established **an Egyptian self-image**

as a culturally superior group whose foreign activities were encouraged by their gods ... A potent factor in sustaining the Egyptian superiority was its supernatural validity, which made reverses abroad, however serious, mere incidents in a cosmic drama in which Egypt and its gods would ultimately triumph. Mythic and real struggles were inextricably fused; the state, personified by the king, ritually aided the gods in their implicitly always successful struggle against supernatural enemies and disorder, while the gods promised the state ultimate victory over its foreign enemies, who were themselves part of that threatening chaos.'

"Thus the enmity between Egypt and her neighbors was rooted in the Egyptian sense of superiority, an attitude that was validated by the religious system.

"This had its outworking in the Egyptian vocabulary used to describe the enemy. The characterization of Egypt's enemies as those of 'bad character' (nbdw □d) is encountered on a number of occasions in the writings of the 18th dynasty. The term nbdw has been associated with the root nbd, which means 'evil, bad'. Not only is this root attested as early as the Old Kingdom, it is the name of the divinity 'the Evil One'.

"Since the enemy was by nature evil, he was often described as vile or wretched (e.g., □rw pf □si n □dšw: 'that vile/wretched enemy of Kadesh'). The root □s(y) means 'weak, feeble, humble', hence also 'mean of conduct'; and it is connected with the terms □st 'cowardice', □sy 'coward', and □syt 'wrongdoing, crime'

"To the Egyptians, the enemy was arrogant. He trusted in his many troops and not in Amun-Re'. He arrogantly rebelled against the order of the Egyptian pharaoh and the Egyptian deities. The Egyptians' concept of the enemy was to regard them as cowardly, vain, and boastful."

5. The infanticide program would have been started by a different Pharaoh that Moses' had to deal with -- a gap of at least 80 years would have occurred between the start of the pogrom and the time Moses' confronted his Pharaoh.

6. Jewish tradition (e.g. the commentary by Rambam on this passage) stated that the killing of the Hebrew males was not just an 'at birth' event, but was more like a 'search and destroy operation': "Then when the king's restriction against murdering Israelite children was removed, the Egyptians searched the Israelite houses, entering them at night, and took their children. That is why Scripture states that Moses' mother could no longer conceal him" [Shemoth, vol 1, Rabbi

Rosenberg, in loc., Judaica Press:1995.]

7. The original Pharaoh who 'knew not Joseph' is the one who started the official oppression and infanticide program. The reference to Joseph provides an additional contrast in the backdrop. Joseph the son of Israel/Jacob literally saved the entire nation of Egypt via God's guidance and fore-warning of the 7 years of famine. And what did the Israelites receive for this? -- A place to sojourn as Asiatic refugees for less than a 100 persons, followed by a couple of centuries of oppression, slavery, and infanticide. God delivered the Egyptians from total disaster via the Hebrews, and then had to inflict a smaller-scale disaster to deliver those Hebrews from the hands of the Egyptians.

8. But even Joseph--at the height of power and influence in Egypt -- recognized that the Hebrew's situation had ALREADY worsened, and foresaw difficulties ahead for Israel:

"God will surely take notice of you ... This reassuring profession of faith, made fifty-four years after Jacob's death, betrays a serious deterioration in the situation of the Israelites in Egypt in the intervening period. The repetition of the statement in verse 25 underscores its seminal importance... The use of a coffin is characteristically Egyptian and is never again mentioned in biblical literature. In striking contrast to the honors accorded Jacob, no ritual or mourning is recorded. The atmosphere, heavy with the anticipation of enslavement, is filled with foreboding." [Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 351.]

"In fact, intimations of a deterioration in the Israelite situation are already discernible in the closing chapters of Genesis. Jacob, on his deathbed, feels the need to give his family the reassurance that "God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers."⁷ Joseph voices his anxiety for the future even more strongly. He tells his brothers, "God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."⁸ The dying statesman knows that his family will not wield the influence necessary to arrange for his burial in his ancestral land as he had been able to do for his father." [Nahum M. Sarna, Exodus (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 5.]

But the oppression was even broader than the large-scale infanticide program, and the references to it, and to the judgments **on the nation of Egypt** at the time of Moses show this.

Most of the statements by God about the Israelite misery **refers to the nation as a whole**, and the warnings to Pharaoh (and their fulfillments) are generally expressed in terms of negative impact upon his people/nation the Egyptians **as a whole**:

- Exodus 3:8-9 ("*So I have come down to rescue them from the **hand of the Egyptians** and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—... And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way **the Egyptians are oppressing them***")
- Exodus 3:20 ("*So I will stretch out my hand and strike **Egypt** with all the wonders that I will do in it.*")
- Exodus 6:5f ("*I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom **the Egyptians hold as slaves**...and I will bring you out from under the **burdens of the Egyptians***"),
- Exodus 7:4-5 ("*Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on **Egypt**... **The Egyptians** shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against **Egypt**...*"),
- Exodus 7:18 ("*The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the **Egyptians** will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile...and **all the Egyptians** dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.*"),
- Exodus 8:2ff ("*But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague **all your country** with frogs...**The frogs** will come up on you **and on your people and on all your servants***"),
- Exodus 8:16ff ("*... so that it may become gnats in **all the land of Egypt**... and there were gnats **on man and beast ... in all the land of Egypt.***"),
- Exodus 8:21ff ("*... I will send swarms of flies on you **and your servants and your people**, and into your houses. And the **houses of the Egyptians** shall be filled with swarms of flies... Throughout **all the land of Egypt** the land was ruined by the swarms of flies*"),
- Exodus 9:6 ("***All the livestock of the Egyptians** died*"),
- Exodus 9:9 ("*boils breaking out in sores on man and beast **throughout all the land of Egypt***"),
- Exodus 9:25ff ("*I will cause hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now...**The hail** struck down everything that was in the field **in all the land of Egypt**, both man and beast.*"),
- Exodus 10:2 ("*...how I have dealt harshly with **the Egyptians** and what signs I have done among them...*"),
- Exodus 10:4 ("*If you refuse... I will bring locusts into **your country**... and they shall fill your houses **and the houses of all your servants and of all the Egyptians***"),
- Exodus 10:22ff ("*there was pitch darkness in **all the land of Egypt** three days*"), and
- Exodus 12:33 ("***The Egyptians** were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, 'We shall **all** be dead.'*")

And these events were remembered as judgments against the **nation**, and **not specifically or solely against Pharaoh** (except as representative of the people):

- Deut 6:22 ("*And the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, **against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all this household***") and
- Neh 9:9f ("*And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh **and all this servants and all the people of his land**, for you knew that **they** acted arrogantly against our fathers*").

Even the priest-scholars of the Philistines are reported to have understood it this way, in I Samuel 6 (notice also that they ascribe self-hardening to all the Egyptians and not just Pharaoh):

- "*Why should you harden your hearts **as the Egyptians and Pharaoh** hardened their hearts? After he had dealt severely with them, did **they** not send the people away, and they departed?*"

We will look at the possible scale of this oppression at the end of this article.

But there IS an emphasis in the text on the role of Pharaoh -- even as an opponent to his staff and magicians -- and this is likely due to **his divine role as Protector of Egypt**. The ruler is 'elected' by the Gods and appointed this role [from: K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (vol. 98; *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 176–177.]

"Thus, at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, as the Egyptian ideological foundations of kingship were reformulated, divine authority took precedence over the monarchy. In order to legitimate his rule, the **king alludes to his 'election' by a god**. In order to justify his actions the monarch claims to be **acting according to the 'commands' of the god**. Hence, even one of the most important rulers of the New Kingdom, Thutmose III legitimates his claim to the throne by an oracular pronouncement of the god Amun and **ascribes his victories to that god's agency**.

"At the ideological level, the **Pharaoh was the protector of Egypt**. During the 18th Dynasty, this concept was extended to cover relations with Western Asia.

"This concept of the **Pharaoh being the protector continues into the 19th dynasty**. Thus Ramesses II describes himself as:

A husband to the widow and protector of the orphan;

He is an intervener for the needy; Valiant shepherd in sustaining mankind;

He is an excellent wall for Egypt, A buckler for millions, **Protector** of multitudes;

He has **rescued Egypt** when it was plundered, marching against the **Asiatics** to repel them.

"This concept of the Pharaoh as the **protector of Egypt** can be clearly seen in an inscription of Merenptah:

Then spoke they, the Lords of Heliopolis, concerning their son,
Merenptah Satisfied by Truth:

‘Grant him a lifespan like Re‘, that he may **intervene** for who(ever) is oppressed by any foreign country.’

Egypt has been assigned to him, to be his given portion; she is his forever, **that he may protect her people**. Re‘ has turned again to Egypt,

The Son is ordained as her Protector.

Three: The theological decision/action by God about the first-born

Strictly speaking, God's action on that first Passover night was somehow/strangely *impartial*. When He judged Egypt, he somehow did something 'analogous' to Israel... Note the logic in some of these later passages:

- “*I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites **in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman**. The Levites are mine, for all the **firstborn are mine**. **When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt**, I set apart for myself **every firstborn in Israel, whether man or animal**. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.” [Num 3.12f]*
- “*The LORD also said to Moses, “Take the **Levites in place of all the firstborn of Israel**, and the livestock of the Levites in place of their livestock. The Levites are to be mine. I am the LORD.” [Num 3.44]*
- “*Have the Levites stand in front of Aaron and his sons and then present them as a wave offering to the LORD. In this way you are to set the Levites apart from the other Israelites, and the Levites will be mine. “After you have purified the Levites and presented them as a wave offering, they are to come to do their work at the Tent of Meeting. They are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to me. **I have taken them as my own in place of the firstborn, the first male offspring from every Israelite woman**. Every firstborn male in Israel, whether man or animal,*

*is mine. When **I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt**, I set them apart for myself. And I have taken the Levites in place of all the firstborn sons in Israel. Of all the Israelites, **I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron** and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary.” [Num 8.13ff]*

- *“The LORD said to Moses, “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. **The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.**” [Ex 13.1f]*
- *“After the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your forefathers, you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. **All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD.** Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, **but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.** “In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, **the LORD killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.**’ “ [Ex 13.11ff]*
- *“No one, however, may dedicate the firstborn of an animal, **since the firstborn already belongs to the LORD;** whether an ox or a sheep, it is the LORD’s.” [Lev 27.26]*
- *“The first offspring of every womb, both man and animal that is offered to the LORD is yours. **But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals.** When they are a month old, **you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs.** “But you must not redeem the firstborn of an ox, a sheep or a goat; they are holy.” [Num 18.15ff]*
- *“Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks. Do not put the firstborn of your oxen to work, and do not shear the firstborn of your sheep. **Each year you and your family are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose.** “ [Deut 15.19f]*

In other words, the first born of EVERYBODY in Egypt at the time (at least of the Egyptians and the Israelites) were taken out of the 'common pool of humanity'. They

became separated (i.e. 'holy') from 'common history' and became a part of 'supra-history'. Some of these individuals were given to death that night, and the rest were kept as God's 'possession'.

There are **two specific differences** between Egypt and Israel on this night, though. One difference deals with the **scope of death** within a household (first born minor son *versus* everybody in the household) and one with **frequency** (one-time-only *versus* every-time-thereafter).

Scope: In the Egyptian household, only the first-born son (not head-of-household) was subject to death. In the Israelite household, if they did not sacrifice a substitute for the first-born, the entire household would die--not just the first-born.

"During the paschal night, **Yahweh threatens both Israel and Egypt**. Since he kills the Egyptian firstborn, symmetry requires that the imperiled Israelites, too, be the firstborn—a logic underlying Judaism's Fast of the Firstborn on the half-day before Passover (Sop. 21:3). **The text reiterates, however, that all Israelite households are endangered, not only firstborn sons (12:13, 22, 23, 27)** (Loewenstamm 1992a: 191)." [William H. C. Propp, Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (vol. 2; Anchor Yale Bible; New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 457.]

Frequency: Although only that one/single generation of Egyptians lost 'ownership' of their firstborn, EVERY generation thereafter within Israel was taken away. God allowed Israel to buy-back some of those animals, and required Israel to buy-back its firstborn sons. If Israel did not buy-back an animal, then it too had to be given over to death.

One class of animals--the firstborn of herd and flock--could not be used for 'common purposes'--they were no longer a part of 'common history'. God gave them over to death, to be eaten as part of God's interaction with His people (His firstborn--Israel). The oxen and sheep were HIS to dispose of and/or to utilize, and He used them as a means of drawing His people closer to Him.

Later, God took the Levitical tribe as a redemption price (buy-back cost) for the 1st born sons. They became His property/possession and He was free to do with them as He willed. He -- in this case -- willed to keep them alive and to use their lives in service to Aaron.

This is a rather complex notion, but what it *seems* to mean is something like this:

“When I judged Egypt, I actually did it in an impartial way. I exercised my authority as Moral Governor and appropriated the firstborn males of man/beast of BOTH Israel and Egypt for My own possession, *to do with as I see fit*. All the firstborn of Egypt and Israel thus became MY PROPERTY, to use/deploy/dispose of in accordance with my choices and plans for history. All first-born were at risk of death--if an Israelite household did not offer the prescribed substitute, then their first-born would suffer the exact same consequence as an Egyptian household. Most of the Egyptian firstborn (which became Mine in this act of 'setting apart' –i.e., “sanctification”) I decided to give over to death, as a last-ditch effort to stop the folly of the Pharaoh (via a judgment he would finally understand *fully*), to stop the infanticide and oppression program, and to impress upon the remaining major of Egyptians the truth of the claims of Moses and Israel about Me (for their ultimate good). Most, if not all, of these children—average age probably around 8 or 9 years of age--would have not reached any 'age of accountability', so most/all of these I brought to myself and my heavenly abode. The firstborn of *Israel* I also took to myself—I am no respecter of persons—but I decided to deploy/dispose of those in different ways. The Israelite sons (those protected by a substitute sacrifice of the Passover lamb) I decided to 'sell' back to the parents instead of 'kill' (i.e., the parents HAD to redeem them with money, and I used the money to support the central teaching and ministry institutions). The Levites who I accepted later as *substitute/payment* for some of these, I gave away—to Aaron to support his ministry to my people. The clean animals I decided to kill and give back to the Israelites to enjoy as food at a community/family bonding “party” (Deut 15.19), and the unclean animals had to be bought back (supporting the ministry) or killed –just like I did the Egyptian animals. No distinction in status, only differences in disposition. I am wise and good beyond your *expectations...* and certainly *well* beyond your *personal* standards...”

This tenth plague is a last resort by God, to overthrow the Pharaoh-led (and hence, divinely-sanctioned under Egyptian theology) oppression of the Israelites. There are nine+ earlier messages to Egypt to abandon their systematic oppression (plus the additional sign given at the beginning, duplicated in some way by the Egyptian magicians).

All of the plagues/disasters/blows to Egypt were designed to subvert the moral and theological justifications of the use of Pharaonic power/authority against the Israelites. This can be seen from the texture of the plagues: they were deliberate challenges to many of the Egyptian deities (one of whom was Pharaoh himself), demonstrating their powerlessness and unreality. Even the choosing the 'firstborn' motif fits into this texture.

The anti-pantheon element is explicit in the text:

"Verse 12 adds a new element to the familiar formula of destruction. **The assault of Yahweh against Egypt for the first time now includes "Egyptian gods."** Now the narrative is understood as **theologically** defined. What finally needs to be overcome is not only the rulers and officials, but also the **gods** of the empire **who sanction oppression and legitimate abusive policy**" [Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; vol. 1; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 1777.]

John Currid summarizes many of these elements in *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* [OT:AEOT, 108-113]:

"Some scholars have suggested that the ten plagues were directed by the God of the Hebrews against particular Egyptian deities. **There should be no question that the biblical authors understood the plagues in that manner.** The Book of Numbers, for example, reports: "*The Egyptians were burying all their first-born whom the LORD had struck down among them. The LORD had also executed judgments on their gods*" (33:4). In fact, the plague account itself contains similar wording: "*For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD*" (Exod. 12:12). The idea that the disasters that Egypt experienced were a mockery of that land and its customs is unmistakable. The Scriptures even use the term mockery (□ālal) for God's judgment upon Egypt (Exod. 10:2).

One can account for most of the ten plagues in this manner. The opening disaster (Exod. 7:15–25) was clearly directed against the Nile River, which in its inundation was deified and personified as the Egyptian god **Hapi**. In fact, as early as the Pyramid Texts the Egyptians called the Nile River by the divine name **Hapi** (h□pi). They often portrayed the god as a bearded man with female breasts and a hanging stomach (pregnant?), all of which reflect the concept of fertility. And, indeed, Egyptian writings spoke of **Hapi** as the one who kept Egypt alive. The "Hymn to the Nile," for example, taught that life in Egypt came from the Nile: "O all men who uphold the Ennead, fear ye the majesty which his son, the All-Lord, has made, (by) making verdant the two banks. So it is 'Verdant art thou!' So it is 'Verdant art thou!' So it is 'O Nile, verdant art thou, who makest man and cattle to live!' "

A major consequence of the Nile's turning to blood was the death of the fish, a staple of the Egyptian diet. The people were unable to eat or drink from the river. **The river and its god could no longer supply** the people's needs. This disaster was a demonstration that true

sustenance came only from the hand of Yahweh and not from a false pagan deity of the Egyptians.

The second plague (Exod. 8:1–6) also appears to be a contest between deities. The Egyptians regarded the **frog** as a symbol of divine power and a representation of fertility. One of the main goddesses of Egypt was **Hekhet**, who was depicted as a human female with a frog's head. She was the spouse of the creator-god Khnum. He fashioned human bodies on his potter's wheel, and then **Hekhet** blew the breath of life into them and assisted as midwife at their births. **Hekhet** also had the responsibility to control the multiplication of frogs in ancient Egypt by protecting the frog-eating crocodiles. But Yahweh overwhelmed **Hekhet** and caused her to be impotent in her task. She could not repel or resist Yahweh's overpowering regeneration of frogs. It was the Hebrew God who really bestowed fertility; he rapidly produced frogs so that they would be a curse upon Egypt. The theme is the sovereignty of God over fertility, over Egypt, over her deities, and over all things.

The third and fourth plagues (Exod. 8:16–24) both involved flying insects as divine judgments against Egypt. The third plague was *kinnim*, a Hebrew term that is not clear in meaning although it likely refers to gnats. Other suggestions are that the *kinnim* were vermin, lice, or maggots. The fourth plague came in the form of *ārob*, which is commonly understood to be a stinging fly, possibly even a mosquito. These plagues may have been directed against the Egyptian self-generated god of resurrection, **Kheprer**, who was symbolized by the flying beetle.

Plague five was the pestilence on the domesticated animals of Egypt (Exod. 9:1–7). **Bull** cults, of course, are known to have flourished throughout the land in antiquity. Ancient Egyptians viewed the bull as a fertility figure, the great inseminator imbued with the potency and vitality of life. **Apis** was the most important of the Egyptian sacred bulls. Other bull cults included **Buchis** (sacred bull of Hermonthis) and **Mneuis** (Heliopolis). In addition, bulls were understood as embodiments of the great Egyptian gods **Ptah** and **Re**. Numerous important female deities were pictured **as livestock animals**: **Isis**, queen of the gods, bore cow's horns on her head; **Hathor** was given a bovine head for her task of protecting the king. The livestock animals provided necessities to the people—in the form of food, milk, clothing, transportation—and they were destroyed in the fifth plague. The biblical author is again demonstrating that Yahweh was sovereign over and in control of all things. The Egyptian gods were imposters.

The subsequent plague of boils (or possibly smallpox) has been identified as a polemic against Imhotep, the vizier of Dynasty 3 who was later deified as a god of medicine and healing. His chapel at Saqqara was used as a sanatorium where cripples flocked from all over Egypt during the Egyptian Late Period (ca. 712–343 B.C.). The problem with this identification is that Imhotep was deified and revered at a much later date than the exodus. Therefore, the sixth plague is incorrectly connected with him. Instead, the malady may have been directed against the Egyptian goddess **Sekhmet**, the lion-headed **deity of plagues**. She was responsible for epidemics in ancient Egypt, but ironically she also had the power to heal those who were visited by pestilence. The priests of **Sekhmet**, one of the oldest medical fraternities in antiquity, included both doctors and veterinary surgeons. Other gods regarded as divine physicians and healers included the Theban god **Amon-Re**, whom a text from Dynasty 19 describes as “he who dissolves evils and dispels ailments; a physician who heals the eye without having remedies, opening the eyes and driving away the squint ... Amon. Rescuing whom he desires ... he makes a lifetime long or shortens it.”

The catastrophe of the hail was a mockery of the **Egyptian heavenly deities**, including **Nut** (the female representative of the sky and personification of the vault of heaven), **Shu** (the supporter of the heavens who holds up the sky), and **Tefnut** (the goddess of moisture).

Locusts were a particularly nasty problem in ancient Egypt. On account of that danger, the ancient Egyptians worshiped the god **Senehem**, who was the divine protector against ravages from pests. An identification **problem** exists because Senehem appears to have been a minor deity in dynastic Egypt. Why Yahweh would have concerned himself to mock a subordinate deity is a problem. Perhaps protecting against grasshopper attack was a function **not merely of one god**, but of the gods in general. A hint of that possibility appears in the Tanis Stele from the reign of Taharqa (Dynasty 25), which speaks of “a fine field, which the **gods** protected against grasshoppers.”

The ancient Egyptians regarded **Amon-Re**, the personification of the sun, as their chief deity. They believed that **Amon-Re** in his rising in the east symbolized new life and resurrection—in fact, they considered him to be the **creator-god**. Papyrus Boulaq 17 (“Hymn to Amon-Re”) reflects the universal reverence the ancient Egyptians paid to the sun-god:

The goodly beloved youth to whom the gods give praise,
Who made what is below and what is above,
Who illuminates the Two Lands
And crosses the heavens in peace:
The King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Ra, the triumphant,
Chief of the Two Lands,
Great of strength, lord of reverence,
The chief one, who made the entire earth.
More distinguished than any (other) god....

But when **Amon-Re** sank in the **west**, he represented something different and antithetical; he symbolized **death** and the underworld. When Yahweh so willed (Exod. 10:21–29), the sun was darkened, and **Amon-Re was hidden and unable to shine upon his worshipers**. During the ninth plague **Amon-Re** did not rise again and did not give life; his realm was death, judgment, and hopelessness.

The Hebrew writers were quite familiar with the cult of **Re** in Egypt. In certain pentateuchal texts, for example, the biblical author employed obvious wordplays on the name of the Egyptian god **Re** and the Hebrew concept of **ra** ("evil"). Apparent allusions are found in Exodus 5:19; 10:10; 32:12, 22; Numbers 11:1; 20:5; and Deuteronomy 9:18. These double entendres were for the purpose of ridiculing the chief deity of Egypt.

The final plague was primarily directed against **Pharaoh as a god of Egypt** and against the Pharaonic succession.

In summary, the pestilences, Yahweh's conquest of Egypt, and the humiliation of Pharaoh constitute a history of severe contempt for the gods of Egypt. A later parallel can be found in the prophet Jeremiah, when he speaks of contemporary judgment on Egypt: "The LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, says, 'Behold, I am going to punish Amon of Thebes, and Pharaoh, and Egypt along with her gods and her kings, even Pharaoh and those who trust in him'" (Jer. 46:25).

Mockery of Egyptian polytheism found expression in other ways in the Exodus narrative. Exodus 11:7, for example, states that during the

final plague “against any of the sons of Israel **a dog shall not even sharpen** its tongue, whether against man or beast, that you may understand how the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.” An arguable point is that the author is making a subtle reference here to the **impotence of Anubis, the god of the dead** and embalming. Anubis, who had **a canine form**, had no power of life or death over the Israelites, who were protected by Yahweh. The inability of the Egyptian magicians to reproduce most of the plagues pointed to the lack of power of the Egyptian gods whom they represented.”

The final plague--the firstborn--is connected both to the theme above, but goes to the ultimate end-point:

"This plague was the final attack on all that Egypt worshiped. Apart from all the natural forces that the Egyptians attempted to propitiate, what they really worshiped in the end was **life itself**. This is the reason for all of their elaborate funerary preparations. Life in Egypt was very good, with a benign climate, a beneficent sun, a very predictable river, and fertile soil brought down by the floods. To them the greatest good was the continuation of such a life. **And in the end it was for the perpetuation of that life that they worshiped their myriad gods.** But Yahweh had shown them in case after case that **these so-called gods did not have the secret of life and that in fact, they could only produce death.** Thus, this final plague is an attack on life itself. Even life does not have life in itself. It is a gift from the sole creator of the earth, and that creator is Yahweh of Israel. How humiliating this must have been to intelligent, cultured, and sophisticated Egyptians, that the stupid Hebrew slaves had found God without looking for him, while they with all their careful searching had found nothing but death... Exodus 11:9–10 forms a summary bringing Moses and Aaron’s interactions with Pharaoh to a close. ... From this point on, all that Moses and Aaron would have to say would be to a people who were free to worship the true Lord of the universe, **not a mere man parading as such.**" [Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis, Exodus (vol. 1; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 368.]

"It is specifically stated in verse 12 that these judgments were directed *'against all the gods of Egypt,'* a fact easily observed from the very nature and progression of the plagues as recorded in the Book of Exodus. Since the death of the firstborn involved both man and beast, it is quite apparent that it had far-reaching religious and theological implications. **The firstborn of Pharaoh was not only his successor to the throne, but by the act of the gods was a specially-born son having divine property.** Gods associated with the **birth of children** would certainly have been involved in a plague of this nature. These

include **Min**, the god of procreation and reproduction, along with Isis who was the symbol of fecundity or the power to produce offspring. Since **Hathor** was not only a goddess of love but one of seven deities who attended the birth of children, she too would be implicated in the disaster of this plague. From the excavation we already have learned of the tremendous importance of the **Apis** bull, a firstborn animal and one revered in a very special sense. The death of this animal and other animals of like designation would have had a tremendous theological impact on temple attendants as well as the commoners who were capable of witnessing this tragic event." [JJ Davis, Studies in Exodus: Moses and the Gods of Egypt, page 148-149.]

The death of the firstborn children was **no more a punishment on the children themselves, than the hail was a punishment on the crops**, or the death of the fish a punishment on the fish, **or the death of the firstborn of the livestock a punishment on the livestock**. All of the damages to crops, livestock, and families were a reduction in the strength and vitality of the nation itself. The firstborn (of all creatures) were seen as **a symbol of strength and future fertility/prosperity**

"Paternally, the firstborn was "the first" (ת' רא) of the father's "(procreative) strength" (Gen 49:3; Deut 21:17) [NIDOTT]

*Reuben, you are my firstborn; My **might** and the **beginning** of my **strength** (Gen 49.3) But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the **beginning of his strength**; to him belongs the right of the firstborn. (Deut 21.17)*

"He is the first fruit of his vigor This is a common description of the firstborn, who is proof of his father's potency and a token of future fertility" [Jeffrey H. Tigay, Deuteronomy (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 196.]

"Instead, he must give the double portion to the elder son, to whom it rightly belongs both on account of the custom and because he represents the strength of his father's virility (21:17). The Hebrew (re'shith 'ono) means, literally, "the beginning of his generative power," that is, the first evidence of the man's procreative ability" [Eugene H. Merrill, "Deuteronomy," in Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (ed. Philip W. Comfort; vol. 2; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 2598.]

And this is how it is seen in the case of Egypt:

*("He struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the **firstfruits** of their strength in the tents of Ham" Psalm 78.51, also in Ps 105.36).*

The first fruit of nature was considered by the ancients to be 'owed' to God. God generally 'gave it back' to nature, but sometimes it had to be 'bought back' from God. When God 'took it' from nature (to Himself) it was normally through death (e.g. sacrifice).

"Ancient peoples believed that the gods were entitled to the first yield of field and womb, and thus the firstborn of cattle and of children were sacrificed to them. Abraham unquestioningly accepted the divine claim to Isaac (his firstborn child with Sarah) and was prepared to give up the life of his child." [Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (1st ed.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 21.]

The offering of Abel in the opening chapters of Genesis indicates the antiquity of this.

"Abel's offering corresponds to his vocation as a shepherd. It may not be coincidence that Adam's second son offers **firstlings** (first-born animals) whereas Cain, the older son, offers **neither firstlings nor firstfruits**. Note the association of the first-born with firstlings in Exod 22:28–29 [29–30]; 34:19–20. The law is insistent that all firstlings must be offered in sacrifice or redeemed. The first-born by right belong to God. So human first-born must be redeemed. Israel as a nation is described as God's first-born (Exod 13:2, 12–15; 4:22; M. Tsevat, TDOT 2:121–27)." [Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (vol. 1; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 103.]

It is important to note here, that this is **NOT** a simple boasting contest about "My God is bigger than your God", but rather a **matter of life-and-death** "My God is forcing your God's agents to STOP KILLING and OPPRESSING millions of people". This is way beyond 'polemics' and 'public reputations'--this required a force greater than the most powerful organization in the world at that time in history.

Four: The role and accountability of Pharaoh for these consequences

The first thing to keep in mind here is that 'force' is not God's first choice of means to accomplish His goals in human life. Death is an enemy to be destroyed -- Isaiah 25.6-8a:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces

"The Lord is king in Zion (24:23), and he prepares a banquet there for all peoples. This kingdom is not limited to Israel, but includes the redeemed humanity from all nations. At this time, a veil or shroud will be removed (25:7). This is probably not a veil of spiritual blindness (cf. 2 Cor 3:15), but the covering worn by suffering humanity during their time of grief (cf. 2 Sam 15:30). At Zion, the Lord will wipe away all tears and remove death forever.

"The Lord will prepare a wonderful feast for "all the people of the world" (25:6). ... The salvation of the poor and needy is especially highlighted with the vivid description of a rich feast.

"The "wonderful feast" and the "delicious banquet" (25:6) introduce a strong positive note with their implied celebration. The adjectives define the high quality of provision—"wonderful feast ... delicious banquet ... well-aged wine ... choice meat" (25:6). It is a celebration "for all the people of the world" (25:6). ...[T]he "cloud of gloom" probably refers to a shroud. The next line has the parallel "shadow of death." This victory celebration includes victory over death, the ultimate enemy (25:8). During the time of this messianic banquet at Zion, the Lord will "remove the cloud of gloom" and "the shadow of death," and he will also "**swallow up death forever" (25:7–8). In Canaanite religion, the god "Death" was known as the great "swallower" of his victims, but here the Lord swallows Death (25:8).** This reference to God's swallowing up of death and his wiping away all tears is aptly quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54 (cf. Rev 7:17; 21:4), in his great passage on the resurrection." [Larry L. Walker, Elmer A. Martens, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, & Lamentations (vol. 8; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 104.]

There is **nothing pleasing to God's heart** about judgement and capital punishment: *Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezek 18.23).*

"By means of a rhetorical question, which anticipates an unequivocal negative response, Ezekiel spells out the basis for the exiles' hope: **Yahweh's fundamental commitment is to human life, not to death. He finds no joy in anyone's death, not even that of a wicked person.** His desire is that all repent and find life in him. This is what Ezekiel's audience needs to deliver them from their bondage of depression and despair—a new vision of God, a **God who is on the side of blessing and life, not on the side of the curse and death** (cf. Deut. 30:15–20).¹⁴¹ What a remarkable declaration of divine patience and mercy this is! At the national level, even though Israel had been in a state of rebellion for generations, the door to the future remains wide open." [Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 583.]

If God has 'no pleasure' in the judicial death of the wicked (performed BY GOD in the context of the Ezekiel passage), **can we really believe that He is 'careless' or 'calloused' by the death of innocents?!**

Even nations against whom God announced catastrophic judgement could become a beneficiary of His protection--**if only the leader and the people responded appropriately** to the pronouncements of judgment. The king of **Nineveh** -- and his people -- responded to the prophet Jonah's oracle of judgment, and God's judgment averted.

*After Jonah had entered the city and walked for one day, he preached to the people, saying, "After forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed!" The people of Nineveh believed God. They announced that they would fast for a while, and they put on rough cloth to show their sadness. All the people in the city did this, from the most important to the least important. **When the king of Nineveh heard this news**, he got up from his throne, took off his robe, and covered himself with rough cloth and sat in ashes to show how upset he was. He sent this announcement through Nineveh: "By command of the king and his important men: No person or animal, herd or flock, will be allowed to taste anything. Do not let them eat food or drink water. But every person and animal should be covered with rough cloth, and people should cry loudly to God. **Everyone must turn away from evil living and stop doing harm all the time. Who knows? Maybe God will change his mind. Maybe he will stop being angry, and then we will not die.**" **When God saw what the people did, that they stopped doing evil, he changed his mind and did not do what he had warned. He did not punish them.**"*

"The king's actions of contrition and his genuine fear of God are usually thought ridiculously improbable on the part of an Assyrian king. But in the same way that Hezekiah donned sackcloth and sought God's help upon hearing the Assyrian challenge delivered by the Rabshakeh outside the walls of Jerusalem in 701 B.C. (2 Kgs 19:1), a wearied, harassed king such as Aššur-dān III of Assyria could well have sought divine help for the many tragedies and miseries he faced, upon hearing a potentially hopeful word of warning from a prophet who had come a long way to deliver it. Jonah's reluctant mission had succeeded against all his own hopes. **God did indeed love more than just Israel. He loved to Jonah's horror—the Assyrians.** ... Jonah did not want Yahweh to do what was right and proper according to **his merciful nature**. Instead of showing to Assyria the kind of undeserving favor he had granted to Israel, he should punish the Assyrians **without giving them any chance to repent**... Jonah cites an ancient formulation, virtually a creed, about Yahweh's grace ("Yahweh is gracious, compassionate, patient," etc)...At any rate, by citing this ancient formulation, Jonah confesses eloquently that hoping to see Nineveh destroyed even after he has preached there (4:5) **he was actually expecting God to suppress his own natural inclination to show mercy wherever possible**... Yahweh's speech focuses on concern (סוּחָ). Jonah's delight, anger, disappointment, frustration, and the other emotions he may have experienced in connection with the gourd are all aspects of concern. Likewise, the **various "emotions" Yahweh may have felt toward Nineveh can be summarized by the statement that he had concern for it**... The "weightier matters" of the law include **mercy** (Matt 22:23). We who have had mercy shown to us must, of all people, be willing to show mercy in return (Matt 18:33). Jonah knew all along that God was gracious, compassionate, faithful, and loyal and that **he decided against bringing death whenever he could find cause to relent from it** (cf. Gen 18:21–33; Exod 32:11–14)."[Douglas Stuart, Hosea–Jonah (vol. 31; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 509–510.]

"Jonah's deep concern had been expressed on behalf of a relatively insignificant portion of God's creation, the vine, while **God's deep concern was expressed on behalf of his highest creation, human beings**. Jonah apparently had grown completely indifferent to the fate of God's creation beyond the bounds of Israel. At every point in this entire chapter, Jonah's attitude stands in complete contrast to God's relationship to Nineveh. **God created and nurtured them and extended to them the hand of mercy.** ... Jonah did not answer correctly God's questions in vv. 4 and 9 and thereby showed his lack of understanding. Consequently, God drew the tremendous contrast between Jonah's anger over the death of a plant and his own delight in Nineveh's turn toward life. The first clause in the Hebrew text is literally, **"Should I, on the other hand, not have compassion on the great city of Nineveh?"**... God's question captures the very intention of the book. The issue is that of grace—grace and mercy. Just as Jonah's provision was the shade of the vine he did not deserve, the **Ninevites' provision was a**

deliverance they did not deserve based upon a repentance they did not fully understand. God's wish for his creation is salvation, not destruction. He will work to see that the salvation is accomplished **if there is willingness on the creation's part**... Possibly the best understanding of this text is to recognize that the Lord was referring to an entire city of morally and ethically naive, though not morally innocent, individuals. The people of Nineveh had already shown sensitivity to their evil ways and so were not ignorant. In contrast to the prophet and the people of Israel, however, the people of Nineveh were in a kindergarten stage of religious knowledge. The Lord ended the statement with the phrase "and many cattle as well." Here he attempted to impart to Jonah that even cattle are superior to plants or vines. **His mercy is great for all his creation.**" [Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah (vol. 19B; The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 282.]

"Let us analyze this anger of yours, Jonah," comments Yahweh. "It represents your concern over your beloved ricinus—but what did it really mean to you? Your attachment to it could not be very deep, for it was here one day and gone the next. **Your concern was dictated by self-interest, not by a genuine love.** You never had for it the devotion of the gardener. If you feel as badly as you do, what would you expect a gardener to feel like, who tended a plant and watched it grow only to see it wither and die, poor thing? **And this is how I feel about Nineveh, only much more so. All those people, all those animals—I made them, I have cherished them all these years.** Nineveh has cost me no end of effort, and they mean the world to me. **Your pain is nothing to mine when I contemplate their destruction.**" ... The Ninevites deserve compassion not only as creatures for whom God cares but also as virtual children compared with the Jews.²⁹ **They know no better, for they have not had the spiritual advantages of Israel, and so it is necessary to make allowances for them.** This is a theme Jesus took up in his cry from the cross: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:24). Paul claimed that he received mercy because he acted in ignorance before he became a believer (1 Tim. 1:13)." [Leslie C. Allen, The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 233–234.]

Can there be a stronger, starker contrast between the leader of Nineveh and the leader of Egypt?

A single prophetic oracle--**without** any 'extraordinary evidence' was sufficient for a leader to recognize error and protect his people by proclaiming a fast and mourning. But with Pharaoh--who had a **massive** amount of extraordinary evidence, had a massive amount of revelatory disclosure, and had even the wise advice of his staff--there is nothing but arrogance, constant demands, anti-Semitic slurs, and restrictions upon Israel/Moses.

There was **no reason at all for Pharaoh to allow this to happen**. He was CLEARLY warned—after **nine previously confirmed** announcements/experiences of plagues! Pharaoh had more 'extraordinary evidence' than probably any other non-Israelite in the world, and **yet he did nothing to protect his people**. He did not humble himself, to avert the all-too-certain judgment on his own son. He did not compromise *after all he had seen...*

Even his staff knew he was wrong and tried to stop his folly--multiple times--but he would not even listen to their advice:

Third Plague--Exodus 8.18: *The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God."* But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

"From the first, the learned men are presented as worthy opponents (see Comment on 7:22–23). They would no doubt have been regarded, just as were Moses and Aaron, as representatives or extensions of the power of deity. **But with this third of the mighty acts, they confess themselves, and thus the power they represent, as outdistanced**...the admission by the learned men, when they are first outdone here in the third of the mighty acts, that "this is an act of a god!" Even if their reference is to their own deity, or to one of their own deities, the declaration is no less significant, for they are acknowledging themselves **outdistanced by a divine power manifested through two men their Pharaoh has refused to take seriously.**" (WBC)]

Seventh Plague--Exodus 9:13ff: *Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Now therefore send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die when the hail falls on them." ' ' **Then whoever feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses, but whoever did not pay attention to the word of the LORD left his slaves and his livestock in the field.***

Notice that in this case--the first plague of truly national economic weight--**God gave them an 'out'**. He specifically told the Egyptian people how to avoid the damage--in spite of Pharaoh's resistance to His demands. The text suggests that some of the servants of Pharaoh

'got the message' and suddenly took God/Moses/Israel seriously! If only Pharaoh had been so realistic!

Additionally, God gives more revelation to Pharaoh, with **notice that the intensity of the damage** is about to increase: "*Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. **For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth.** But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Now therefore send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die when the hail falls on them."*

"Verses 14–16, as they stand now in the composite account of the seventh mighty act, are directed forward, first of all to the mighty act immediately at hand, and second, to the cumulative impact of the concluding mighty acts, especially the terrible darkness, the death of the first born, and the decisive victory at the sea. **In this seventh mighty act, for the first time Egyptian lives are lost; in the eighth mighty act, the last remnants of life-sustaining food are destroyed; in the ninth mighty act, the very source of light and life in Egypt, the sun-god Kephri-Re-Atum (see ANET3, 12–14), is overpowered; and in the tenth mighty act, any ordered future that Egypt might have is cut off in the death of the first born.** Thus Yahweh tells Moses to say most appropriately to Pharaoh that he is now sending his “whole arsenal of blows” and now loosing his “power” to strike Pharaoh and his people with “the epidemic,” the ultimate raining of blows so complete that Pharaoh will be effaced from the earth.... Pharaoh continues still to lord it over (hithpael of ללס) Yahweh’s people, that is, **to tyrannize them**, and to refuse to send them out of Egypt... The warning of Yahweh to Pharaoh that he and his people should take precautions to protect both themselves and their livestock from the death-dealing hail is without parallel in the entire proof-of-Presence sequence. **It stands as a further indication of the fatal seriousness of the last four mighty-act accounts** and is a further confirmation of the context of the awesome pronouncement of vv 14–15, described above. For the first time, a mighty act is to bring not just annoyance, not just physical reverse, but death—and so Yahweh gives a warning. The report of this warning and the news that

some members of Pharaoh's court take it seriously, while some do not, serve both to intensify the gathering suspense of the narrative and **to indicate a further weakening of any possible human basis Pharaoh could have for further resistance.**" [WBC]

"The **months of leniency** are almost over. Now the full blast of the ensuing plagues will penetrate directly to Pharaoh's "heart" (v. 14; NIV, "against you"). The "heart" (lēb; GK 4213) does not signify "his person," as nepeš (GK 5883) can (Keil and Delitzsch, 1:489); rather, it refers to his inner being, nature, and **seared conscience. His pride and arrogance will be tossed to the wind as the terrors** of these new plagues force him in perplexed and desperate sorrow of soul literally to beg the Israelites to leave his presence immediately. -- Yet Pharaoh is no mere pawn to be toyed with at will, for the object is that **he too may come to experience** personally and believe ("know") the incomparability of God's person and greatness" [EBC]

"The good advice to be given by Moses to the king, to secure the men and cattle that were in the field, i.e., to put them under shelter, which was followed by the God-fearing Egyptians (v. 21), was a **sign of divine mercy, which would still rescue the hardened man and save him from destruction.** Even in Pharaoh's case the **possibility still existed of submission to the will of God**; the hardening was not yet complete. But as he paid no heed to the word of the Lord, the predicted judgment was fulfilled (vv. 22–26)" [KD]

Eight Plague--Ex 10.7ff: *Then Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?" So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh...*

"Then Pharaoh received another blow: **The solid front of support for him among his courtiers had been breached by the previous plague**, the hailstorm (9:20–21). Now that support apparently collapsed completely (10:7). **Undoubtedly, the desperate state of affairs had "gotten to them."** The animals were wounded and dying, the flax and barley were gone, and now if the locusts came, all the wheat and fruit would be gone too. They must have thought, "**How much is one man's ego worth?**" [Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis, Exodus (vol. 1; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 359.]

"The announcement of such a plague of locusts, as their forefathers had never seen before since their existence upon earth, i.e., since the

creation of man (v. 6), **put the servants of Pharaoh in such fear, that they tried to persuade the king to let the Israelites go.** “How long shall this (Moses) be a snare to us? ... Seest thou not yet, that Egypt is destroyed?” שֶׁרֶץ, a snare or trap for catching animals, is a figurative expression for destruction." [KD]

"Pharaoh's officials—till now, silent observers in this contest of wills—pick up Moses' “How long?” (v. 3) with a “How long?” of their own: “How long will this man [zeh, ‘this (man),’ not zō□t, ‘this (situation)’] be a snare to us?” (v. 7). **Out of loyalty to their king and country they blame Moses; but it is obvious that they are beginning to become impatient with Pharaoh's intransigence.** Cannot Pharaoh see the “snare” this man is setting for them, and **does Pharaoh not realize that Egypt is nearly ruined?** How long, indeed, can all this continue? Someone has to give in. They urge Pharaoh to yield: “Let the people [hā□anāšīm, ‘the men’ in the generic sense] go.” --- In another first, Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to return to the palace for some negotiations related to the imminent pestilence (v. 8). Clearly as a sop to his frightened officials, Pharaoh half-heartedly gives Moses his permission to take Israel to sacrifice in the desert." [EBC]

"His prediction made, Moses turns abruptly and leaves Pharaoh and his courtiers to ponder it, as they do immediately and with some anxiety, a further indication of the seriousness of this blow, **for in no previous instance have Pharaoh's advisers acted so. The passion of the courtiers' appeal to Pharaoh has a note of accusation in it, an implication that his resistance is creating the impasse and bringing on the ruin of Egypt, and more than a hint that he has not counted the cost of his pride**" [WBC]

The pattern is clear--not only was the data very, very clear as to who was God and who should be obeyed (for the safety of Egypt!), but the more reasonable of people (the educated religious leaders and the trusted staff/officials of Pharaoh) saw this clearly--and even attempted to 'get this through' to Pharaoh.

[There is a good probability, btw, that the Egyptians (and other peoples) were 'allowed' to participate in some version of this first Passover [the Egyptians had a form of partial circumcision--which the Israelites practiced in Egypt--which obviously 'counted as adequate' theologically in this first Passover, even though it had to be modified at the time of the Conquest, Joshua 5], and would therefore have been 'passed over' and spared the death of the firstborn. The 'mixed multitude' in Ex 12.38 ("*A mixed multitude also went up with them*") is sometimes understood as INCLUDING such 'converts'(?). Some of the rabbinic commentators labeled this as 'nations of proselytes', some modern commentators have taken a similar position, and

the author of the WBC commentary on this passage connects this to the instructions about 'foreigners' in the Passover legislation given in Exodus 11-12:

"The tradition of a "motley group" accompanying the Israelites in their exodus may well be an accurate reflection of a **process referred to also in the narratives of conquest and settlement** (e.g., Josh 9:3–21 and 24:14–28). That there were **many who became Israelite by theological** rather than biological descendancy is many times referred to in the OT and is **the occasion for such requirements as those set forth in vv 43–49** of this composite." [John I. Durham, Exodus (vol. 3; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 172.]

"The "many other people" (𐤀𐤊𐤁𐤁𐤁; KJV, "mixed multitude"; cf. the "swarms" of flies in 8:21[17], 𐤀𐤁𐤏𐤁) are composed of **Egyptians** (some "feared the word of the LORD" in 9:20), perhaps some of the Semitic population left from the Hyksos era and slaves native to other countries. Some of this group must be part of the "rabble" (𐤁𐤏𐤏𐤁𐤏𐤁, lit., "a collection") mentioned in Numbers 11:4. Thus the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, of **being a blessing to "all peoples on earth," receives another fulfillment in this swarm of foreigners who are impressed enough by God's power** to leave Egypt with Israel after all the plagues have been performed. Another aspect of God's display of his power is so that the Egyptians can, if they only would, be evangelized (7:5; 8:10, 19; 9:14, 16, 29–30; 14:4, 18)." [Kaiser, EBC]]

The decisions of this leader -- in spite of all contrary data and logic -- cost Egypt these deep and traumatic losses. It was Pharaoh who was accountable for this damage--not Moses, not God, not the Hebrews. It could have been avoided.

Five: The moral elements involved: innocence and consequences, reciprocity and blame

Innocence/Consequences. We need to state here again--that although the innocents died *because* of the 'sins of the nation', the innocents were **not punished** for those sins. There was no guilt assigned to the children or to the livestock. The death of these children were not a 'punishment' on *them*, **any more than** the Hebrew children's' deaths in the infanticide were 'punishment' on *them*.

We have noted many, many times on the Tank that malignant actions by people have *concrete negative* consequences on themselves, their families, their communities, and in a real sense, on God. Furthermore, when judgment is exercised relative to the treacherous, *everybody else* also suffers (i.e., they are killed/restricted in helping;

their families are deprived of an important member—and maybe affected by a negative example; the community is weakened by the loss of a contributor and the grief of having to do punishment; and God is grieved at the failure and the loss...). In a very real sense, it is the parent/leader *who inflicts* these negative consequences on all—irrespective of the role of judges/punishers in the process. The culpability is NOT assigned to the court, the judge, or the executioner—it is the *criminal* who 'does this' to his/her own family. It is *not* the human judge who decrees capital punishment on a serial killer who renders his kids 'fatherless'--it is the criminal *himself* who abandons the kids in his life of crime

As I have pointed out (and even developed somewhat) numerous times on the Tank [especially in the article on Natural Evil at <http://www.christian-thinktank.com/natevl.html>], the death of people before old-age *might* be CONSEQUENCES of someone else's evil deeds, but it would generally be incorrect to say that those deaths were “punishment' for someone else's evil deeds.

When an abusive father kills his child in a fit of rage, the child dies BECAUSE of the SINS of the FATHER, but the child is not being PUNISHED by being killed. When a child dies of an illness caused by neglect of a parent, they die BECAUSE (somewhat, at least) of the SINS of the parent, but their death would not be considered as a PUNISHMENT on the child for the neglect of the parent. It would be a CONSEQUENCE of the sin, but not a ‘punishment’ *per se*.

The Exodus story involves a corporate or national punishment, and in these cases—including the famines and plagues that later came upon Biblical Israel for their own national and community evil—both innocent and guilty suffer. The consequences of covenant treachery on the part of biblical Israel include famines that would lead to cannibalism of children--but this was a punishment on the parents, not the children. The deaths of entire families were often caused by the evil of the ruling parent. And--as in the case of Pharaoh--the deaths and deprivations of the common people were often caused by the stubborn evil of an Israelite or Judahite king. Pharaoh had no monopoly on 'stubbornness' or 'hardening' -- the Hebrew kings and leadership were often confronted with clear and consistent warnings by God via the prophets. And those prophets often met with the same arrogance and stubbornness that Moses and Aaron experienced.

But also, when a nation or group is blessed by God for goodness of values and action and direction, both deserving **and undeserving** benefit.

So, the reader should be clear throughout this article that **I am not saying in any way** that the Egyptian children who died in the Plague of the Firstborn were being 'punished' for ANYTHING, in the same way that the death of the Hebrew babies was not a 'punishment' on them for ANYTHING either. When someone dies 'because' of another (e.g. drunken driver, soldier in battle, parent too far away to help), they are almost never being 'punished' for someone else's sins. And this case—as in the cases of famines and plagues and wars in the ANE—is no exception.

Reciprocity/Blame. We should note that one of foundations of moral governance is that of **Reciprocal Morality** (i.e., the “Golden Rule”). This can be seen in many cultures and is the basis for the 'talion' laws in Lev 19.18 and Deut 15.13. This principle is **ubiquitous** in human law and human instruction. Consider how wide the range of this is:

“Similar kinds of statements, focusing on a morality of reciprocity, are to be found in various cultures. One of the oldest such sayings is attributed to Maeandrus by Herodotus: “I will not myself do that which I account blameworthy in my neighbor” (Hdt.3.142; cf. 7.136: “I will not do that which I blame in you”). Similarly, Thales, when asked how men might live most virtuously and most justly, is reported to have replied: “If we never do ourselves what we blame in others” (Diog. Laert. 1 [Thales].9). An early positive formulation of the principle is found in Isocrates: “You should be such in your dealings with others as you expect me to be in my dealings with you” (*Nicoles* 61)... A negative formulation tends to predominate, particularly in Eastern cultures, where it is **variously found among the Confucians, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians**. For example, to Tzu Kung’s question—“Is there any one word that can serve as a principle for the conduct of life?”—Confucius is reputed to have answered: “Perhaps the word ‘reciprocity’; do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you” (*Analects* 15.23). On the other hand, a later source (16th century) identifies “Treat others as thou wouldst be treated thyself” as a traditional saying.” [[ABD](#), s.v. “The Golden Rule”]

And it is thoroughly embedded in **Jewish** tradition:

“The Golden Rule (Mt 7:12). “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” has been known as the Golden Rule since the eighteenth century. There are **numerous parallels to this saying in Greco-Roman, oriental and Jewish writings**. There is a particularly close rabbinic tradition in *b. Sabb.* 31a: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow creatures.” Although a negative formulation along these lines is much more common than the positive formulation of Matthew 7:12, the latter is found in some Jewish writings (*Ep. Arist.* 207; *T. Naph.* 1; *2 Enoch* 61:1); hence it is a mistake to claim that the positive form of the Golden Rule is distinctively Christian.” [[NT:DictJG](#), s.v. “Sermon on the Mount/Plain”]

It occurs in **Egyptian** literature in the old story of *Ahiqar* and in *The Instruction of Ankhsheshonq* (both probably after our period, though).

“The Teaching of Ankhsheshonqy (AEL 3: 159–84) was discovered on a long papyrus scroll written in the late 1st century b.c. The beginning of the text and the top lines of all twenty-eight columns are lost. The citation of lines, some in sequence, on two papyri of 2d century b.c. date suggests that the original goes back to the early Ptolemaic period. The maxims are embedded in a narrative framework which recounts Ankhsheshonqy’s imprisonment on a charge of plotting against the pharaoh’s life. This recalls the story of the wise Ahiqar which was current in Egypt not only in a 5th century b.c. Aramaic text from Elephantine, but also in a Demotic version. There are striking parallels between some maxims in the two compositions. The most significant themes concerning the wise man versus the fool and the certainty of retribution, **together with two formulations of the Golden Rule.**” [[ABD](#), s.v. “Egyptian Literature”]

This would mean that **if Pharaoh said it was morally appropriate for the Egyptians to kill someone else's children (without actual guilt), then he was implicitly agreeing (morally) that it was okay to kill his own peoples' children.**

[In fact, it's even stronger than 'agree'. This is what a personal moral code is—an implicit *request* to the Moral Governor of the Universe to *enforce your own morality throughout the 'system'*. Pharaoh, as a moral governor himself, essentially 'requests' God's guarantee that he will 'reap what he sows'. This is *supposed* to be a good thing (i.e., I count on God to do the first half of “I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee.”), but in the case of such large-scale atrocity, it is disastrous... Pharaoh has no excuse for his actions nor for the consequences of those actions, nor does he have a leg to stand on, when his people might confront him later with “why did *you* bring this on us, by doing this to the Israelites *first*?!” A smart Egyptian would know instinctively that it wasn't “God's fault” that this happened, but that it was “Pharaoh's fault”! (Cf. Exodus 9.10 and 10.7, where Pharaoh's court knows this truth!). [For more of the theoretical foundation of this, see section Two in one of the Personal Letters ([pl2003m11d03.html](#)).]

We should note that this 'I will enforce your own legal/moral code back upon yourself' motif (throughout the bible, btw—cf. Jer 17.18, for an example) applies also to extending the punishment to innocent members of the family. Egypt (like Babylon under Hammurabi) had laws in which members of families were punished for the acts of one member:

“Sometimes a whole family might be punished for the actions of one member.” [[OT:HLAE](#), p. 94]

In the ANE, families were units--and most cultures could not easily absorb or support 'fragments of families' (e.g. widows, orphans, and elderly without support). And generally speaking, families operated under solidarity. If the patriarch took the position XYZ, any adults living under their roof/authority had to support that position--or leave the household. So, condemnation--for example--of the 'sins of the fathers' were generally an indictment of the 'sons' too--since they would have been supportive of those sins. "Sins of the fathers" were thus shared-sins, and therefore were 'sins of the sons' also--generally speaking. The actions of all adults produced consequences upon the entire household.

What this nets out to is this: God's judgment upon Pharaoh is *entirely consistent* with the laws/ethics of Pharaoh (maybe even, 'predictable?'). There is no 'unfairness' in visiting his own actions (in some lesser form) 'back upon his head'. This is a consequence of reciprocal morality, was practiced *everywhere* (in governance circles), and was **completely avoidable**. Pharaoh has no excuse for bringing this (final) judgment upon his nation.

Pushback: God-as-judge versus God-as-peer -- the '2 wrongs don't make a right' and 'why not kill only Pharaoh?' questions

Pushback: “*Maybe it's just me, Glenn, but this 'do unto others' stuff sounds sorta like God is 'stooping down to Pharaoh's level'. Just because Pharaoh was a cruel, abusive, and merciless oppressor **doesn't mean that God should be one! Surely there's a limit as to how far God can go with this 'payback in kind' stuff?! And surely it's before the killing of innocents? After all, two "wrongs" don't make a "right" ... and, anyway, why didn't God just kill Pharaoh alone -- since he was the guilty one here?***

Although this sounds plausible--since we tend to see 'revenge killings' as barbaric--it does not really apply very closely in a **judgment context**.

For example, "two wrongs don't make a right" applies only if there **are** two actual "wrongs". If God's actions were morally appropriate--as a Universal Judge and/or Legal Advocate of His people--then clearly there are **not** 'two wrongs'. The actions of God here are judgments, not strictly 'revenge reprisals' *per se*.

For example, in a context of capital punishment for murder, the judge who condemns a convicted first-degree murderer to be executed is not seen as 'stooping to the level of the convict' (e.g. it is not the unprovoked and self-justified killing of another person, but a socially-sanctioned commensurate elimination of a

threat/disease/destructive-agent) or as being a 'wrong meant to cancel out another wrong'. It is seen rather--as an act of social justice, of balancing out the 'resources of the system' (i.e. the criminal is stronger-for-evil since he/she eliminated a counter-weight for-good; to restore balance to the 'weights' in the system, his/her undue and artificial extra-power to do damage must be eliminated). But only a judge 'above the fray' could make an impartial decision like that--unlike simple 'blood/kinship revenue' (i.e. 'the avenger of blood' roles in the ANE).

[Whether the punishment is execution or life-in-prison is immaterial to the point here--either of those are drastic reductions in the ability of the perp to damage the system further. Imprisonment for a lifetime--*without* judicial cause--we would call 'kidnapping' and judge it AS A WRONG. But this doesn't fit a judicial context.]

The 'stooping' slur wouldn't apply in several other relevant contexts either:

- In self-defense, the law and conscience allows 'appropriate response'
- In police actions, police are allowed to use 'appropriate force' to STOP crimes (e.g. infanticide, enslavement!) and/or to DEFEND themselves against violence against their persons.

So, overall, the 'stooping' accusation wouldn't apply to this type of intervention by God on the behalf of Israel (as victims).

To 'cancel out a wrong' would actually require a 'right' of equal-or-greater 'magnitude' and of an opposite 'vector direction' (assuming such a 'cancellation' is possible--but this gets us over into soteriology--with a glance at the Cross of Christ, the self-giving of God's firstborn for the sins of the world--including Pharaoh and the Israelites and the firstborn children of the 10th plague).

But the question of 'how far to take this' is a good one, since reciprocity (as governance) essentially demands 'as far as the crime'. But in contrast, we know from many passages in the Hebrew bible that God exercises mercy 'inside' judgements, and often even reverses negative consequences (the 'I will restore the fortunes of XYZ' type passages).

Why not kill/punish only Pharaoh? Because Pharaoh was only one member of the nation, even though he was the leader. He was not the ONLY guilty agent--if the narrative stands as accurate. The original Pharaoh probably did not kill a single Hebrew baby with his own hands, but his orders to the nation to do so created his massive culpability in that, shared with the actual 'killers'. Could they have disobeyed Pharaoh?--yes, they could have--the midwives did. But they did not--as evidenced by the evasive actions of Moses' mom.

And the long history of the NATION (not just the leadership) in oppression was involved, as was the actions of the later Pharaoh at the time of Moses' actions. And if nothing else, the Pharaoh that opposed God/Moses 'earned' the culpability associated with all the damage done to his own nation Egypt, BEFORE we even get to the death of the firstborn event.

We should also recognize the inequity of killing just a single person Pharaoh when the nation's infanticide program probably involved millions of victims. (We sometimes feel this inequity ourselves when we see a serial killer/rapist be condemned to be executed--for killing 20-30 people... something just doesn't feel 'right' about that mismatch of consequences... or when a gunman kills a dozen students or citizens and then kills himself--we don't consider that suicide to be 'what he deserved'--families of victims of such multiple-victim atrocities often suffer from lack of closure or a sense of being deprived of justice).

At the same time we have to realize that the plagues of Exodus are *not solely* judgements but are also acts of disclosure -- so that Egypt might come to know the Lord, and experience His favor via a covenant relationship.

And a further qualification would arise from the fact that neither the infanticide of Egypt nor the midnight deaths of the firstborn were actually 'aimed' at the children. They were instead 'aimed' at the people/nation. The original Pharaoh did this to keep the Israelite **nation** weak, subjugated, and in slavery. God did the plague of the firstborn as a blow against the **nation** (and their theological sanction of the oppression) as well.

Could God have punished or subdued Egypt without destroying large parts of their resources?--and done so with the revelatory intent still effective? He **intended** to do so--of course--by starting out with only 'annoyance-level' plagues, but the lack of response to those messages forced escalation after escalation. [This was similar to the 'cycles of discipline' in the Covenant with Israel.]

One final consideration here, I think, is that there WAS a disparity in the severity of the crimes and the judgements after all. When you **compare the oppression/infanticide** done by Egypt **to the scope/nature of the tenth plague**, it becomes obvious that God's action was significantly less severe and less extensive by comparison. The asymmetry is easily noted:

1. God gave Pharaoh a way out—in fact, 10 ways/chances out; Pharaoh gave the Israelites ZERO.
2. God's action was a one-time event, which stopped the continuing killing by Pharaoh (and any further damages to his people); Pharaoh's program was every day, every year, every decade...
3. Pharaoh's applied to every male baby--not just the firstborn male.

4. The Egyptian children probably died more humanely in their sleep (it was around midnight); the Israelite babies were thrown in the river to drown.
5. Pharaoh's program involved massive human agency--all Egyptians--with untold effects on the hearts of the Egyptians and the effects of state-sponsored hatred/vilification of the Hebrews.
6. But the biggest difference might be the scale of the two programs/events. The rough calculations below suggest that the damage of the infanticide program might have been 20x to 40x greater in blood-spilt. This alone is a massive difference, and precludes the thought that God was stooping to that same level...

The intuition expressed in the pushback though--that maybe a complete 'equality' of response might not be morally 'appropriate'--does find *general* support in one of the more programmatic statements of God's semi-talonic pattern (Ps 18.25-26):

With the kind you show yourself kind;

With the blameless you show yourself blameless;

With the pure you show yourself pure,

And with the crooked you show yourself astute." [astute, tortuous, shrewd]

Notice that the parallels are equal in all the 'good elements' (same base words), but not equal in the 'bad' one (different roots).

.....

Pushback: Did God just force -- via 'hardening' -- Pharaoh to provide a pretext for this action?

I have insisted throughout this article that ALL of this was avoidable-- that had Pharaoh been one-tenth as reasonable as the king of Nineveh in Jonah's story, there would have been nothing but the economic loss of large-scale slave labor (as opposed to the 'ruin of Egypt' noted by Pharaoh's servants).

One of the phrases in the opening question suggested otherwise:

"[E]very time the Pharaoh wanted to let the chosen people go, God hardened his heart!"

A careful reading of the text, of course, indicates that Pharaoh NEVER really wanted to let the chosen people go--every time he conceded a point, it was with heavy qualifications and heavy restrictions. He somehow always believed--up to the very end--that he was a still a 'peer at the negotiating table' with God! None of his 'offers' to let them go reflected in any way an admission of defeat by a "rival God".

There is just no indication of a 'willing heart, eager to obey God' which was deadened and turned in the opposite direction to what Pharaoh 'really wanted'!

But that doesn't completely nullify the question of 'hardening' and 'could Pharaoh have chosen otherwise?'--eliminating the need for such drastic/traumatic measures by God.

I have already written a couple of pieces on the Tank about this, to which I refer the reader for the details of the sequence and the interactions:

- An older piece on the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart ([harden.html](#))
- More data on the Hardening of Pharaoh's heart--the sequence of events ([moharden.html](#))

Elsewhere I wrote this in a summary response to this issue (abridged):

"His (the objector) first quote: "***God hardened Pharaoh's heart as an excuse to devastate Egypt. He took away Pharaoh's right to make the right decision and forced him to make the wrong one.***"

This is an oversimplification of one of the most complex events in biblical history. The interplay between the cruel Pharaoh, the Israelites under his very harsh slavery, the will of Pharaoh, the court magicians, the 'gods' of Egypt, the Israelite leaders, and the 'hardening' (strengthening) of Pharaoh's will by Yahweh is immensely complex, and yet the skeptic has made this sweeping and facile statement.

This was the nation that had oppressed Israel for centuries, using recently infanticide, and whose Pharaoh brutalized Asiatics (not just Israelites) as a matter of course. God's first comment about him was this:

*Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. 17 I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.' 18 They will listen to your voice; and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.' 19 I know, however, that the **king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand.** 20 So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go (Ex 3.16ff)*

Notice that the first comment is that the Pharaoh will require 'compelling'--**not to fight Yahweh, but to yield!** Our skeptic friend does not stop to consider how to integrate this data into his understanding; he simply selects the other passages that affirm that "I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go" (Ex 4.21).

It is well known that Pharaoh hardened his own heart on the first several confrontations (7.13-14; 22-23; 8.15, 19, 32; 9.7) and only then did God begin to "give him what he asked for" (9.12; 10.1, 20, 27; 11.10; 14.8). Even then Pharaoh is still involved in the process (9.34-34). There is nothing like God 'taking away his right to make the right decision'! God treated him like He often treats us: He confronts us repeatedly with opportunity to choose good, and as we consistently say "no, go away" He eventually withdraws His support for our initial "mixed criteria" and gives us over to our then-firmed-up intentions/wills. God just coordinated this judgment with the good-hearted deliverance of two million people from oppressive slavery! His devastation was a judgment on the nation (Ex 6.6; 7.4; 12.12), not an excuse.

There are many, many other theological subtleties here, such as the relation between God and rulers, between the Patriarchs and the Hebrews, and between these events and the 'conversion' of numerous Egyptians (including some of the court magicians, cf. Ex 9.20), and some of this can be found in the Tank discussions of this issue

.Another case of judicial hardening can be found in Joshua 11.20: "*For it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.*" (But note in our analysis of this subject elsewhere that God's purpose was expulsion, not genocide *per se*.)

The commentator for the EBCOT points out in this passage the same themes we see throughout the bible:

"God hardened the Canaanites' hearts, **not to keep them from repenting, but to prevent them from surrendering to Israel in unrepentance.** The examples of Rahab and the Gibeonites demonstrate the unchanging purpose of God that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom 10:13). As in the case of Pharaoh, God may be said to harden the hearts of those who harden their own (cf. Exod 8:32 with Exod 9:12). God was patient as long as there was any hope of repentance (Rom 2:4), but the sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure (Gen 15:16)."

My point is that the skeptic's statement is simply off-base, and reflects neither the major themes of the narratives, the details in textual sequence, nor the complexity of divine-human interaction."

To this, I might add some additional clarifying observations by scholars:

"The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is not solely attributed to God, however. **In fact, the earliest statements in Exodus that depict Pharaoh's heart growing hard are simple statements of fact** (i.e., "Pharaoh's heart was hardened," Ex 7:13, 22; 8:19 [MT 8:15]), as a simple state (i.e., "Pharaoh's heart is/was hard," Ex 7:14; 9:7) or as Pharaoh hardening his own heart (Ex 8:15 [MT 8:11], 32 [MT 8:28]). **God is not said to harden Pharaoh's heart until after Pharaoh's heart had been hardened several times** (Ex 9:12). Even after this, Pharaoh once again hardened his own heart (Ex 9:34, 35). Only beginning in Exodus 10 does God consistently harden Pharaoh's heart. **Thus, it would appear that God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart was a reaction to Pharaoh's continual stubbornness and not God's immutable will for Pharaoh.** Though God had foreknowledge of what would happen to Pharaoh and ultimately chose to confirm Pharaoh's hardheartedness by continuing to make Pharaoh stubborn, God did not condemn Pharaoh unjustly. **Instead, he continued what Pharaoh already had started.** Therefore, although God foreknew what he would do with Pharaoh and it was his ultimate will to harden Pharaoh's heart, God was long-suffering with him until Pharaoh showed himself to be intransigent (Rom 9:14–24). In fact, while others acknowledged God's work in the signs and wonders of the plagues, Pharaoh remained stubborn to the end (Ex 8:19; Kaiser, 255). We should not read the statements in Exodus concerning God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as implying that God wanted Pharaoh to be destroyed (cf. 2 Pet 3:9; Kaiser, 256). Instead, **God never forced Pharaoh to be anything he was not**, and the punishment Pharaoh received was justice for his intransigence and his mistreatment of the Israelites." [A. E. Steinmann, "Hardness of Heart," ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 383.]

And

"Others respond to the problem of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by pointing out that God did not harden Pharaoh's heart contrary to Pharaoh's free choice. The Scripture makes it clear that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. It declares that Pharaoh's heart "grew hard" (Exod. 7:13), that he "hardened his heart" (Exod. 8:15), and that "Pharaoh's heart grew hard" the more God worked on it (8:19). Again, when God sent the plague of the flies, "Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also" (8:32). This same or like phrase is repeated several times (see also 9:7, 34, 35). In fact, with the exception of

God's prediction of what would happen (Exod. 4:21), the fact is that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first (7:13; 8:15, etc.), and God hardened it later (cf. 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27).

"Scholars have pointed out that different Hebrew words for "harden" are used in this passage (Forster, 1555–68). Qashah, meaning "stubbornness" is used twice, once where God is the agent and once where Pharaoh is (7:3; 13:15). In both cases it is used of the overall process, not a particular act. Kated, meaning "heavy" or "insensitive" is used many times, not only of Pharaoh's heart, but of the plagues. God sent a "heavy" swarm of flies, hailstones, and swarm of locusts. Chazaq, meaning "strength" or "encouragement" is used of Pharaoh's heart. When Pharaoh is the agent of hardening kated is used. When God is the agent, chazaq is used. **"Although Pharaoh is making his own moral decision, God is going to give him the strength to carry it out,"** writes Roger Forster (72). On this understanding there is nothing morally sinister about God "hardening," Pharaoh, and it is an understanding with which moderate Calvinists and Arminians could concur.

"The question can be summarized as follows: does God harden hearts?"

God does not harden hearts	God hardens hearts
Initially	Subsequently
Directly	Indirectly
Against free choice	Through free choice
As to the cause	As to their effect

"If God is hardening Pharaoh's heart (or anyone else's) in accordance with their own inclination and choice, then God cannot be charged with being unjust, unloving, or acting contrary to their God-given free choice. And the Scriptures are clear that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. So, what God did was in accord with Pharaoh's own free choice." [Norman L. Geisler, "Pharaoh, Hardening Of," Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics (Baker Reference Library; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 592.]

And

"What is noticeable is that there is **no reference to God's hardening the heart of Pharaoh until after the sixth plague is well under way**. There are only two references (9:34, 35) to Pharaoh hardening his own heart after God's hardening is done. And surely it is significant that **even after God has hardened Pharaoh's heart (#6 [9:12]), Pharaoh, at least once more, can harden his own heart (#7 [9:34])**. But after that God, and God alone, does the hardening (#8 [10:20]; #9 [10:27]; #10 [11:10]). It is as if Pharaoh's window of opportunity has slammed shut.

"A strong concentration on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart can **cause us to miss the several clear ways in which God attempted to soften his heart:**

1. By the prayers of Moses: "Pray to the LORD" (8:8[4]; 9:28; 10:17); "Pray for me" (8:28[24])
2. By the testimony of his own magicians: "This is the finger of God" (8:19[15])
3. By moving him to partial obedience: "I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD" (8:8[4]); "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land ... I will let you go ... only you shall not go very far away" (8:25–28[21–24]); "Go ... only let your flocks and your herds remain behind" (10:24)
4. By moving him to partial penitence: "I have sinned this time; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong" (9:27); "I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin" (10:16). Putting together the "I have sinned" of 9:27 and the "he sinned yet again" of 9:34, Greenberg (1969: 161) notes, "He acknowledged guilt but went right on being guilty." Pharaoh needs to hear the word in Matt. 3:8: "Prove your repentance by the fruit it bears" (NEB).
5. By continually giving Pharaoh another chance: God is as long-suffering with Pharaoh as he was with Moses after the burning bush. Moses' repeated "I will not go" is matched by Pharaoh's repeated "I will not let you go." That God had to act ten times before Pharaoh acquiesced is neither unexpected nor surprising. After all, in terms of long-range effectiveness, or even for the first few generations after the deluge, how successful was the flood, another act of divine judgment?

[Victor P. Hamilton, Handbook on the Pentateuch (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 164-5.

And--if we note Paul's use of the hardening motif from Exodus in Romans, even a God-initiated hardness is reversible, and can be softened:

"More telling is the objection that **Paul appears to present 'hardening' in Romans 11** (see vv. 11–24) **as a condition that can be reversed**. The spiritual obduracy denoted by 'hardening', in other words, while ultimately caused by God, is **not clearly presented as a permanent condition**. On this view of the matter, the condition of being 'hardened' is one that can change through the work of God's grace. As Paul puts it in Romans 11, those among the Jews who have been 'hardened' (v. 7) have not stumbled 'so as to fall beyond recovery' (v. 11). By their faith, they can be restored again to the olive tree, the people of God (v. 23)." [D. J. Moo, "Hardening," ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, New Dictionary of Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 533–534.]

But what about verse 25 in the rehearsal of Exodus by the Psalmist in Psalm 105:

(23) *Then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham.*

(24) *And the LORD made his people very fruitful and made them stronger than their foes.*

(25) ***He turned their hearts to hate his people, to deal craftily with his servants.***

Would this 'turning' seem to be a similar motif to 'hardening'--and perhaps even more indicative of 'divine immediate causation'?

Probably not--commentators normally understand this as mediated by secondary causes and/or situational causes, especially **jealousy** or '**paranoia**' (cf. Ex 1.7-11 which seems to be the basis for this section of the verse):

"The first two verses summarize Exodus 1: Israel's multiplication (Ex 1:7) and Pharaoh's **jealousy, both of which resulted in their being hated.** The Lord blessed his people (v. 24), providentially created Israel's adversity (v. 25), and was ever ready to protect his people" [Willem A. VanGemenen, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms (Revised Edition)* (ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland; vol. 5; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 5777.]

"Narration of the exodus out of Egypt after the plagues that went forth over that land. V. 25 tells how the Egyptians became their "oppressors." It was **indirectly** God's work, inasmuch as He gave increasing **might to His people, which excited their jealousy**" [KD]

"The people remained there and **prospered** (v. 24; see Exod 1:1-7), provoking the **hatred** of the Egyptians (v. 25; Exod 1:7-22)." [J. Clinton Mccann Jr., "The Book of Psalms," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (ed. Leander E. Keck; vol. 4; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004), 41105.]

The Exodus 1.7-11 passage puts the 'fruitfulness' as the cause for the 'dealing shrewdly' and 'dread':

"Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them. 8Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more

*numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the **more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly.**”*

"The rise of a new dynasty at just the time when Jacob/Israel's progeny had become so numerous brings together the two events that create the context of the early chapters of Exodus. **The new king is faced, as every new king always is, with a series of problems**, some of which were unnoticed by his predecessors, or were viewed as assets rather than as problems (Gen 47:6). **Among the problems of this new king is the large and incredibly prolific colony of foreigners in the delta region**, a territory unfashionable to his predecessors, but the very corner of the kingdom in his plans. **Thus he must deal with this people and find justification for doing so. The new king chooses fear as his justifying motive.** -- (10) This sense is supported by the king's immediate proposal of a solution. The text reads הִנְיָ "give, permit" (BDB, 396), plus the hithpael imperfect of חָכַם "we make ourselves act wisely," to give a tactfully posed suggestion, "My advice is that we outsmart..." **This advice is made urgent not only by the fear that the sons of Israel might join forces with potential invaders** (a curious fear if they were already literally more numerous than the Egyptians), but also by the still greater fear that "they might even go up from the land." --- (12) That the **Pharaoh's propaganda campaign worked** is suggested by the graphic use of the verb חָכַם at the end of v 12; the root means "**feel loathing or abhorrence for.**" [John I. Durham, Exodus (vol. 3; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 7–8.]

Six: The scale of the oppression and the scale of the first-born deaths

In this section, I want to try to do some **rough estimates** of the scope of the two elements.

First, let's try to estimate how many deaths were caused by the on-going infanticide program of that original Pharaoh.

- First of all, it applies to ALL males, not just firstborns and not just survivors of infancy. It would kill many babies which would have died in the first year of life anyway.
- As such, it would target a full 50% of the newborn population.
- That it was at least somewhat successful can be inferred from the evasive tactics deployed by Moses' mom, in an effort to avoid the program. This would suggest a high degree of success of the program.

- But we can more precisely estimate the success of this program from its **effects on the firstborn males of Israel**. If we take *literally* the biblical figure of 600,000 males-over-twenty who left Egypt, we would expect a firstborn portion of that to be around 200,000 or so (family of 6 kids, 3 females). But, when the firstborns are counted in Num 3.40ff, there are **only 22,000 of them**. This indicates either one of two things: (1) much higher family sizes; or (2) **infanticide numbers close to 180,000**. Probably the answer is a mix of these, given the higher fertility given by YHWH and attested to by the text. So, we might accept **an infanticide number of between 150k-180k, at a minimum—of firstborn males only**.
- Estimating the number of *non*-firstborn male deaths is much more difficult. If we start the process with the ratio of escaped-to-killed firstborns, we start with something like a 1:7.5 ratio (1 escaped to 7.5 killed, from 22,000 escaped to 165,000 killed). Applying this to the non-firstborn male population (over twenty) of $600,000 - 22,000 = 578,000$, this would yield a *high* (IMO) number of $578,000 \times 7.5 = 4,335,000$ killed newborns.

Let's do a quick sanity check on this, to see how close to realism this *huge* number might be.

- The 600,000 over-twenty number would likely have been composed of adult males between 20-45, with the hard labor killing off most people toward the end of this range.
- This number is generally taken to imply a population of 2-2.5M total Israelites (which fits with how 'scary' this was to an Egyptian state of 2.4M people).
- This would mean that most of these adult males would have been born **after** Moses fled from Egypt (when he was 40 years of age).
- Moses was born during the pogrom, but we do not know long it had been in place. It was, however, well-enough known that people knew to take stealth measures to protect their kids (Aaron was Moses' brother, and he apparently made it through too.)

Quick population growth calculations would set up the following (conservative!) scenario:

- Twelve pairs of reproducing Israelites enter the land at year 1 (we know there were more than that, but I am using this for 'safety').
- In a twenty-year span, each pair can produce 3 couples of male/female (6 people, 1 survivor every 3+ years or so), who survive to reproduce the next generation. [Some mortality losses are made up by the continued reproduction of the parents after the twenty years (perhaps another kid or 2), the extra 'starter' pairs/couples at the beginning of the period—each pair of which would generate up to an additional 177k people at year 220!, and special fertility/mortality blessings by God—indicated in the text).

- At year 220 (11 generations of 20 years), you have a surviving population of 2.125M (close to our biblical population estimate).
- Between year 220 and 240, there would be 4.25M *new* surviving births, at this rate [yielding a total population of 6.4M].
- This twenty-year period would represent 2.125M *male* surviving births.
- The hard labor pogrom started before Moses was born, and was obviously in effect when he returned at 80 years of age, so this constitutes *prima facie* evidence that the infanticide program was *also* in effect **for at least 80 years** (however effective it might have been—needless to say, Pharaoh needed a large contingent of slave labor for the building projects, so he could not be TOTALLY efficient in killing off his future laborers. But, he obviously would not want the labor force to rise *much more above* the 'scary' levels which initially raised his concerns). Over an 80+ year period (minimum), this would suggest something on the order of 27,000 average cases of infanticide every year for eighty years (no adjusting for exponential effects, of course—I am just thumb-nailing this for a sanity check).
- To have a 600,000 adult male population, of average age 30 at the time of the Exodus, you only have to produce 20,000 surviving male births per year during the relevant 20-40 year window (all while Moses is in Midian).
- A 20,000 (escaped) to 27,000 (killed) ratio is 1:1.35, much lower than the 1:7.5 ratio we calculated for firstborns, *so this level of infanticide is very, very understated.*
- A population of 600,000 fertile females can *easily* give birth to 47,000 males (27,000 which will be killed) and 47,000 females (total of 94,000 births). This yields the exodus numbers as well as the hypothetical 2.1M infanticide deaths.
- But can a population of 600,000 fertile females produce twice that--for the larger infanticide numbers calculated on the basis of the observed firstborn escaped-to-killed ratio (4.335M)? Twice 94,000, or 188,000 live births per year? Yes. One year of pregnancy, plus one year of nursing, plus one year for mortality/other negative effects, yields one-third of these giving birth per year—200,000 total. This is doable, even when adjusted downward for longer nursing periods, infertility cases, etc.

So, our sanity check says that the infanticide numbers can *easily* range from 1.2M to 4.3M (over the 80 year period), without taxing the system at all. If we take the simple midpoint between these numbers—**2.75M** male infant deaths due to the pogrom—we are very, very conservative, compared to the estimated decimation of the firstborn males.

Now let's try to size the 10th Plague, from a couple of different angles.

- It is **first** of all **confined to first-born males**. The nouns 'firstborn' in the plague-promise are masculine in the Hebrew (as they are in the Greek of the LXX, and in the parallel dedication of the Hebrew firstborn [*true* firstborns, not *surviving*

firstborns--'those who open the womb'...Num 3.12, 18.15]-- in Ex 13.12), so this would initially eliminate two categories of households:

1. Households in which the firstborns were *female* (approximately 50% of the households in Egypt).
2. Households in which there are NO *surviving* male *firstborn* children (probably another 25% of the households (half of the other 50%), due to high infant mortality rates—especially among first births).

This suggests that **only 25% of the households** in Egypt at the time would have had firstborn male children who could be victims of the plague.

- **Second**, it looks like this is **limited to children**, and *not* adult sons (as head-of-households and fathers themselves). The reference to the son of the slave-girl, would have been referring to a young child, and the reference to children born in prison (and not sold off and removed to pay debts), indicates this. [The parallels in Hebrew law support this.] This eliminates households that are headed by adult firstborns (overlapping with the categories mentioned above), which have no surviving male firstborn *children* in it (irrespective of the age of the head of household. I.e., if the head-of-household was a 15 year old firstborn male, no longer living with parents, they would probably be exempt, being classified as an adult. Any children of theirs, of course, would fall under these other categories, and *one* of them *might* fall into the victim class.).
- **Third**, the average number of children per family would have been in the 5-7 range:

“It is difficult to assess the size of the average Egyptian family from surviving records. Late Middle Kingdom documents from the town of al-Lahun mention families with between two and six children, but Middle Kingdom stelae often show much larger family groups. A late-Twentieth Dynasty list of households at Dayr al-Madina gives an average of six people per family, but this probably does not include infants, or grown-up children who had left home. The evidence of stelae and tombs from Dayr al-Madina shows that families with eight or ten children surviving into adulthood were not uncommon.”

[[OT:CANE:377f](#)]

This would imply that 1/5th-1/7th (approximately 16%) of the total child population would have been the **eldest** (and hence a *candidate* for being the firstborn), and then half of that (8% of the total child population) being males, and then 1/2 of those being firstborn males (4% of the entire child population), using a 50% infant mortality rate. So, this means that **4 out of every 100** children (unmarried, under 15-20 years of age or so) were possible victims of the plague, while **96 out of that 100** were *not*.

- **Fourth**, on the other hand, *every household would likely have lost an animal* (although it looks like it might have been confined to male animals too, based on the Hebrew parallel). And thus, the '*there was not a household in which there was not something (male) dead*' would have been *referring mostly to animals*, with only a small minority of the households (**25%**) and a much, much smaller minority of children (**4%**) being referred to.

Can we try to figure out how many children this is? This is tough, but we can try to make a rough cut, based on population estimates of the nation.

Population figures for ancient Egypt are difficult to have any certainty about (in this period—later periods have much more census data available), so let's note the range of estimates:

- “The population of Egypt by 1250 BCE has been estimated at 2.8 million...” [[OT:CANE:319](#)]
- “Karl Butzer's population estimates of 1.2 million people for the Old Kingdom and 2 million for the Middle Kingdom... Even if we were to allow a population as high as 3 million, which I do not consider unreasonable...” [[ACAEC:31](#)]
- “In the short term, they were so successful that Egypt's population had risen to more than a million by 2250 B.C.” [[HI:AC:106](#)]

Since we are dealing with the New Kingdom, we'll use an average of the 2M and 2.8M (above), giving 2.4M. Let's apply our calculations from above to this number.

With a household size of 2 (adults) + 6 (kids) + 1(domestic servant) = 9, this yields 266,667 households. Taking 25% of these (from above), this yields **66,667** possible victims.

- With there being 2 kids for every non-kid (6 kids versus 2+1 non-kids), in the population, the 2.4M yields 1.8M kids (2/3rds of the population), 4% of which is **72,000**.

If we use **69,000** for an average/round number, this is slightly **less than 3% of the total population**. [It should be noted, though, that the plague is specifically targeted against Egyptians, and *not* non-Egyptians. There was a sizable group of non-Egyptians living in Egypt in the New Kingdom (e.g., merchants, slaves, military, etc), which could *easily* reduce these figures by 30%. And we should further reduce this by some number of Egyptian households who actually 'came over to' Israel, and became part of the Exodus community at this point.]

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Okay, that's our sizing... Now let's summarize the comparison data:

1. Innocent *Egyptian* Infants killed in the Tenth Plague: 69,000
2. Innocent *Hebrew* Infants killed in the infanticide program of the Pharaoh (and successors): 2,750,000.

The ratio of these is basically 1:40, meaning that **for every single innocent Egyptian child who died in the Tenth Plague, 40 innocent Hebrew infants had been killed by Pharaoh in the on-going infanticide program.** (Remember, there is no evidence that the infanticide program had **stopped** by the time of the exodus, and the fact that the oppression/labor had continued unabated argues that it had **NOT** stopped. From all the indications of the text, **another** 27,000-54,000 Hebrew babies would have been drowned/killed *that* year, and the *next* year, and the *next* year, and *on and on...* until Pharaoh was stopped.)

Also note that **even if** my estimates of Egyptian deaths are *way too low*, and **even if** my estimates of Hebrew deaths are *way too high*, **these numbers are still so far apart that there will almost be no way to even achieve “parity”**, let alone some “culpable inequity” in this judgment. If there is inequity in this deal, it is clearly the *Hebrews* who bear its brunt—not the Egyptians.

So, if there is ANY reasonableness/justice in the 'reap what you sow', 'judges must visit the intended consequences back upon the head of the perp', or 'the punishment must match, but not exceed, the crime', **then this judgment truly was “unfair”--but in the opposite direction posed by the questioner.** Pharaoh/Egypt gets off incredibly easy—God could have 'fairly' killed *every person living in Egypt at the time* (2.4M) and STILL not have reached the 2.75M infanticide number...

Summary

So, given the huge disparity in the scale, intent, nature, and effects of these two actions (the Tenth Plague, Pharaoh's death-labor and infanticide programs), and in light of the universal principles of moral governance, delayed judgment, and reciprocal morality, I have to conclude that God was acting well within the bounds of propriety in this action, and indeed, was 'unreasonably' lenient in this judgment on Pharaoh and Egypt.

No one likes judgment—especially God!--but this one occurred in a context of warning, ease of avoidance, clarity of purpose, extraordinary evidence, and exceptional delay (80 years+). God used a difficult judgment to stop a much, much larger program of atrocity.

How long had His appeals to Pharaoh's and the Egyptians' sense of decency/compassion fallen on deaf/cold hearts???

GM

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<http://christianthinktank.com/killheir.html>