



Why Did God Choose Egypt?

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In the great prophecy about Egypt in Holy Book of Isaiah chapter 19, God makes at least two statements about the Egyptian people and their country that He does not make about any other nation or people. In fact, what God says about Egypt could pertain only to Israel as God's unique people, or God's Church under the Old Covenant, at the time Isaiah writes his prophecy.

The Prophet Isaiah says that *in that day* "there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt" (v. 19) when God proclaims, "Blessed be Egypt My people" (v. 25). Beyond question, this is a prophecy of Egypt's conversion to Christianity. And history tells us that early in the Christian era, after a rather quick and widespread embrace of the apostolic faith, Egypt emerged early as a leader amidst the universal Church of the New Covenant. It was only under this new phase of God's economy of salvation that God began to reach out to the Gentiles by grafting them into the Body of His Messiah, thus making them part of "My people," a specific term that God uses throughout the Old Testament to distinguish His unique people Israel from all the other peoples of the earth, including Egypt.

And yet, we know that it was God's intent from the beginning to reach out to *all* nations. When God calls Abraham to make of him a great people, it is for the very purpose of blessing all peoples. "I will bless you, and make your name great, so *that you will* be a blessing and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:3)." To cite but one of numerous references, our father among the prophets King David asks God to bless Israel precisely "*that* Thy way may be known on earth; Thy saving power among all nations (Ps. 67:2)." And through the last of the prophets to be included in the Old Testament - **Malachi, who prophesied of the Elijah to come, St. John the Baptist - God speaks of a future when**

"My name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name is great among the nations (Mal. 1: 11)."

But if God always intended to reach out to all nations - if in the end "all nations" will worship God (Rev. 15:4) - why did God single out Egypt as the only Gentile nation whom He would claim as "My people"? Why is Egypt the only Gentile nation in which God speaks of an altar in its midst? Why Egypt? Let us examine this question in more detail.

Not only is Egypt mentioned in the Holy Bible more than any other nation besides Israel, Egypt is there from the very beginning; not the great nation, but a person, the grandson of Noah by Ham (Gen. 10:6). It was he, Egypt (Mizraim), who founded the great nation that would bear his name (Ex. 9:18, 24). After Abraham comes on the scene - a descendent of Shem, another of Noah's three sons - we see a very interesting dynamic between the seed of Egypt and Abraham and his seed who maintain the faith in the true God. Their histories become intertwined in a tight dependency, and yet each maintains its distinctiveness and separateness from the other.

As soon as we are introduced to Abram, we see him sojourning to Egypt to escape a severe famine (Gen. 12: 10). And thus Egypt saves our father among the patriarchs. Later, by the design of God, Abraham would return the favor when his great grandson Joseph would save Egypt and the world from famine (Gen. 41: 55-57); but only after Egypt saves Joseph. And Joseph was able to save Egypt only after he was exalted to the pinnacle of Egypt's national life. When he reveals himself to his brothers, Joseph also reveals the incredible extent to which the lives and destinies of Egypt and the people of God were intertwined and interdependent. "God sent me before you to preserve



for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Gen. 45:7-8).

Among those survivors who would leave Egypt some 430 years later were Joseph’s two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, born of his Egyptian wife, a daughter of an Egyptian priest of On. So the blood of Egypt, the grandson of Noah, mingled with the blood of Israel, the grandson of Abraham, in the land of Egypt. And thus the descendents of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, Joseph the “fruitful bough” (Gen. 49:22), began as half Egyptian.

God’s promise to Abram - “I will make of you a great nation” was fulfilled in Egypt as God Himself attested to Jacob in the same words, “I will *there* make of you a great nation” (Gen. 46:3). Egypt is thus the womb, as it were, that gave birth to Israel, and the bosom that nourished it through infancy. And despite all the acrimony between Moses and Pharaoh and his court that would come centuries later, and which endures as the image of Egypt’s relation to Israel, the Egyptian populace even during the time of the Exodus looked with favor on the sons of Israel, and Moses himself “was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh’s servants and in the sight of the people” (Ex. 11: 3; 3:2 1).

Despite all the entanglement of their national lives early in the life of Israel, there remained a clear distinction between Hebrew and Egyptian on both sides. Three things remained an abomination about the

Hebrews to the Egyptians: eating bread with the Hebrews (Gen. 43:32); “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians” says Gen. 46:34 (which makes Joseph rise to prominence as “father” to Pharaoh all the more astounding); and “offerings abominable to the Egyptians” (Ex. 8:26). For their part, the Hebrews held a similar perspective of the Egyptians, for centuries later Ezra lists Egypt as among “the peoples of the lands with their abominations” (Ezra 9: 1). But even from the beginning, Jacob and Joseph knew the destiny of their people would be separate from Egypt, for as they remained steadfast in Abraham’s faith, they insisted on being buried with their fathers in Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his seed.

Nevertheless, the defining event in the life of the two nations, that which put them at odds with each other, was the Exodus. It is during this time that God first speaks of Israel as “My people I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the

Egyptians” (Ex. 6:7). God also intended at the same time to make Himself known to the Egyptians, but at Egypt’s great expense. “Pharaoh will not listen to you; then I will lay My hand upon Egypt and bring forth My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth my hand upon Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them” (Ex. 7:4-5). So the same act of God was to become at one and the same time an act of mercy for Israel and an act of severe judgment on Egypt.



Joseph



No nation on earth was to experience the brunt of the wrath of God Almighty as did Egypt when God purposed to decimate the most powerful nation on earth to glorify Himself among the nations. And that is precisely what God did when He smote Egypt, and with plagues of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of cattle, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the first-born, He “made sport of the Egyptians” (Ex. 10:2). “I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD (Ex. 14:4).”

St. Paul picks up on the same theme early in his great discussion of Israel and the Gentiles in Rom 9-11. Quoting from Exodus, St. Paul says, “For the scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth’” (9:17). St. Paul then speaks of “vessels of wrath” that “make known the riches of His glory for the vessels of mercy,” even from among the Gentiles. In fact, St. Paul, this time quoting Hosea, says that in Christ the Gentiles are now among those whom God calls “My people ... Those who were not My people I will call ‘My people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘My beloved... (Rom. 9:25).

Toward the end of his discussion, as he explains how the Gentiles are grafted into the people of God, St. Paul exclaims, “Behold then the kindness and the severity of God.” “I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy” (Rom. 11:25, 30-31).

Perhaps we have here a hint of an answer to our question, “Why Egypt?” Was there any nation with

whom God was more severe than Egypt? Would not, then, the lover of Mankind extend His kindness to Egypt, at least in proportion to His severity? We have already considered how intertwined and dependent Egypt and Israel were at the beginning. Even at the apex of their enmity during the Exodus, when God was setting apart “My people,” all that Israel had of the world was Egyptian. For example, all the knowledge, technology, craftsmanship, and material required constructing the tabernacle after the pattern revealed by God to Moses was acquired by the Israelites from the Egyptians. Remember, the Israelites began as a people in Egypt as shepherds 430 years earlier! What nation on earth other than Egypt could have better prepared God’s people for their task in the wilderness of Sinai?

So of all those “not My people” who were to become “My people,” we should not be surprised to see Egypt heading the list; indeed, the only Gentile nation God singles out as “My people.” God, in His great program for reaching out to the Gentiles, chooses the nation historically most representative of the Gentiles. And He who commanded His people not to “abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land” (Deut. 23:7), even though that land was to them an “iron furnace,” would He not also extend His kindness and forgiveness to that same Egyptian? Would not the Lover of Mankind, who has commanded all to love their enemies, Himself set the example by extending His love to the chief antagonist of the “people of His own possession?”

God does not give us an explicit answer to the question of why He specifically calls Egypt “My people” who are to have the privilege of an altar in their midst. But to choose Egypt among the Gentiles in such a manner is entirely consistent with the historical interaction between Egypt and Israel - and the nature of God Himself as love. To God be the glory!