

Know Your Spiritual Enemies: The Egyptians

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Exodus 1:6-14

⁶ And Joseph died, all his brothers, and all that generation. ⁷ But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them.

⁸ Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹ And he said to his people, "Look, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we; ¹⁰ come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and it happen, in the event of war, that they also join our enemies and fight against us, and so go up out of the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh supply cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹² But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were in dread of the children of Israel. ¹³ So the Egyptians made the children of Israel serve with rigor. ¹⁴ And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage—in mortar, in brick, and in all manner of service in the field. All their service in which they made them serve was with rigor.

Isaiah 31:1-3

- 1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
And rely on horses,
Who trust in chariots because they are many,
And in horsemen because they are very strong,
But who do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
Nor seek the LORD!
- 2 Yet He also is wise and will bring disaster,
And will not call back His words,
But will arise against the house of evildoers,
And against the help of those who work iniquity.
- 3 Now the Egyptians are men, and not God;
And their horses are flesh, and not spirit.
When the LORD stretches out His hand,
Both he who helps will fall,
And he who is helped will fall down;
They all will perish together.

Isaiah 19:19-22

¹⁹ In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. ²⁰ And it will be for a sign and for a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the LORD because of the oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Mighty One, and He will deliver them. ²¹ Then the LORD will be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day, and will make sacrifice and offering; yes, they will make a vow to the LORD and perform it. ²² And the LORD will strike Egypt, He will strike and heal it; they will return to the LORD, and He will be entreated by them and heal them.

Secrets of Heaven 1462

The ancient church existed in Egypt, among many other places, and during the time the church lasted there, the arts and sciences flourished. Egypt, consequently, symbolized scholarly learning. Eventually, though, its people wanted to use their expertise to pry into religious mysteries; they wanted to rely on their own powers in examining whether various divine secrets were true. When that happened, magic came into being, and Egypt then symbolized scholarship that twists the truth, which gives rise to falsity, which in turn gives rise to evil.

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It should be recognized that in themselves known facts are neither true nor false. Rather, they become true in the hands of those who are guided by truths, and false in the hands of those who are steeped in falsities. What use they are put to and then made to serve is what determines which of these they become. The facts people know are like the wealth and riches they possess. Wealth and riches in the hands of those governed by evil are ruinous because they put them to evil kinds of use, whereas wealth and riches in the hands of those governed by good are advantageous because they put them to good kinds of use. So too with factual knowledge.

Introduction

- Without Egypt, the children of Israel would have died off before they even had a chance to become a nation.
- And the Egyptians also enslaved the children of Israel for hundreds of years.
- We're doing a series of sermons on the different enemies of the children of Israel and today we're going to try to better understand the Egyptians.
 - First, we're going to look at what Egypt was like and why it has the symbolism that it does in the Lord's Word.
 - Then we're going to look at some times when Egypt is good and times when Egypt is not so good.
 - And then we'll look at some applications of these ideas.

The Symbolism of Egypt

- What do you picture when you think of Egypt?
 - I would guess pyramids, hieroglyphs, sarcophagi, and the Nile river.
 - It was a place with lots of knowledge and skill.
 - You can't build pyramids that last for thousands of years without a lot of understanding of engineering and construction.
 - Egypt has a long history as a powerhouse of the ancient world and a center for knowledge and learning.
 - The library of Alexandria, one of the largest and most significant libraries of the ancient world was eventually built in Egypt.
- And so the teachings of the New Church tell us that Egypt, in the Word, symbolizes things having to do with knowledge and learning.

The Nile River

- It wasn't by accident that Egypt had the longevity that it did.
- Unlike a number of the surrounding nations, it had a reliable water source in the form of the Nile river.
- Egypt gets very little rain, except near the Mediterranean coast.
- But it doesn't need rain because the Nile river provides it with lots of water.
- This means that Egypt was less susceptible to famines that come when there is a lack of rainfall.
 - And it meant that, when there was a famine somewhere else, people from that area would go to Egypt to get food.
 - Like Abram.
 - In the first chapter that we meet Abram he has to travel to Egypt because of a famine in "the promised land".
 - And Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get food when they were experiencing a terrible famine.
 - That's how they eventually reunite with Joseph who is running Egypt at that point in the story.

- Intriguingly, even though the Nile was this huge benefit to the Egyptians and, even though it was part of what kept the children of Israel alive, the Lord tells the people that it's actually better for them to be going to a land where they'll get their water by other means.
 - Deuteronomy 11:10-12
 - ¹⁰ For the land which you go to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it by foot, as a vegetable garden; ¹¹ but the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven, ¹² a land for which the LORD your God cares; the eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the very end of the year.
- The land of Canaan or "the promised land" symbolizes something higher than the land of Egypt.
 - A place that receives "the rain of heaven" instead of river water that you move around by foot.
 - The spiritual as opposed to the natural.
 - One aspect of rain is that we would be less likely to claim credit for it happening.
 - It's more obviously out of our control.
 - Whereas if you have a consistent river bringing you water, and you build some canals from it and machinery to use that water to irrigate your fields, it would be very easy to think that you were pretty much responsible for the water or the one in charge of it.
 - In Ezekiel we read this about how Pharaoh thinks about the Nile:
 - O Pharaoh king of Egypt,
O great monster who lies in the midst of his rivers,
Who has said, 'My River is my own;
I have made it for myself.' (Ezekiel 29:3)
- Now we know that the water in the Nile river did, in fact, come from rainfall.
 - But that rainfall happened way upstream, hundreds of miles away from the land of Egypt and so it's easy to forget where it came from.
 - Factual knowledge does actually come, in the beginning, from the Lord our God as the source of all truth and order and knowledge in the world.

The "Amazon" River

- To give you one more angle on understanding the symbolism of Egypt, I want you to think about another river that you probably talk about at least once a week – the Amazon river.
 - There is a huge river in South America that's the Amazon river but I'm actually talking about the company that's named after it.
 - Each day nearly countless physical products and digital content flow along the Amazon company river.
 - Think of all the knowledge that is contained in all the books, e-books, and audio books that you can buy from Amazon.
 - Not to mention the TV shows, movies, documentaries, music, etc.
- The teachings of the New Church tell us that there are still things today that symbolize the same things as ancient nations used to.
 - I wonder if Amazon – with its good sides and bad sides – would symbolize a similar thing to what ancient Egypt did.

Egypt When It's Good and When It's Not So Good

- You could have all the products from Amazon and all the knowledge from all the books but still not be a good person.
- Now, let's talk about when Egypt is something good in our lives and when it's not.
- Here's one passage that talks about the positive and negative meanings of Egypt:
 - *Apocalypse Revealed* 503
 - We will now say what Egypt symbolizes in the Word: Egypt symbolizes the natural self joined to the spiritual self, and its affection for truth then and consequent knowledge and intelligence. And in an opposite sense it symbolizes the natural self divorced from the spiritual self, and its conceit in its own intelligence then and consequent irrationality in spiritual matters.
- And here's a passage that explains how we can developmentally progress from one to the other.
 - *Apocalypse Explained* 654:34
 - People are born natural, and at first acquire knowledge from their teachers and parents, and also from the reading of books, and... from their lives in the world; and unless a person becomes spiritual, that is, is born anew, they use the knowledge that they have acquired to justify the appetites and pleasures of the natural person....
- Like we read about in our first lesson from Exodus.
 - Egypt is a place where the children of Israel "increased abundantly" and "grew exceedingly mighty" and it's also a place where they were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians and put to work to build cities for the Egyptians.
 - Sometimes people might not even realize that they've been enslaved.
 - Something along the lines of the popular saying that people spend their lives doing work they detest to make money they don't want to buy things they don't need in order to impress people they dislike (For source see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/04/21/impress/>).
 - When we get stuck in working hard for worldly things, we are enslaved by the Egyptians.
- The Lord eventually led the Children of Israel out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
 - But, as they wandered in the wilderness, and even once they were in the land of Canaan, they still sometimes wished that they could go back to Egypt.
 - They longed for the fleshpots of Egypt.
 - They regularly said that it would have been better to have never left Egypt.
- This is a useful thing to notice and recognize about the Egyptians as a spiritual enemy.
 - Generally speaking, they're not an enemy that comes marching out to attack people.
 - Yes, there is the story of them chasing the people to the Red Sea but that was because they were trying to get their slaves back.
 - Egypt tends to an attractive place that people want to go back to and then they get enslaved.
 - And, later in the story, in the time of the kings, the kings sometimes think that it would be a good idea to rely on Egypt to help defend them against another enemy.
 - The Lord tells them that relying on Egypt is like trying to lean on a reed as a staff – it won't support you and you'll get hurt (Ezekiel 29:6-7).

Applications

- Let's talk about using these ideas.
- What can we learn about the danger of the Egyptians?

Egypt is Not Your Spiritual Home

- Egypt is not your spiritual home.
- Egypt is a good place to spend time but it's not where you want to end up settling permanently.
 - Gaining more knowledge is a stop along the way but it's not your destination.
 - The destination is to be using that knowledge in service of the Lord and other people.
 - That's what happens when Joseph is in charge of Egypt or when the Egyptians are subordinate to Israel.

Feel Free to Plunder the Egyptians

- Related to this, we should feel comfortable taking from the Egyptians.
- When the children of Israel left Egypt they took gold, silver, and clothing from the Egyptians (Exodus 12:35,36).
 - That was what they were supposed to do.
 - It was the appropriate use of the goods of Egypt.
 - Some of those materials they eventually used in building the tabernacle.
 - And that's a good image of the role that knowledge is meant to play – it's meant to be materials that can be used in service of a higher purpose.

When Going into a Difficult Conversation

- It's also worth thinking about the role of the Egyptians or knowledge when we're going into a difficult conversation.
- It is good to have the facts straight when dealing with a difficult conversation.
 - It's appropriate to make sure that we've done our due diligence and have found as good and as reliable information as we can.
- But there's something much more important than having our facts straight: coming with the right spirit.
 - If we are coming into the conversation, ready to use our knowledge to dominate the other person, then we are in the wrong, no matter how "right" we might feel.
 - If we're just waiting for the chance to say, "Boom!" then we are in the wrong frame of mind.
- We need to get the facts right but we also need to get our heart in the right place.
- This doesn't mean that we have to not share our perspective.
 - It doesn't mean that we can't disagree.
 - It doesn't even mean that we necessarily shouldn't explain where we think the other person might have an inaccurate understanding of things.
 - Those things are all fine, if they are done in an effort to love the Lord and love our neighbor.
- The facts can be very useful, if they are serving spiritual principles.
 - Egypt can be very helpful, if it is subordinate to Israel.

- The facts shouldn't be our God; our own opinion shouldn't be our God; the other person's opinion shouldn't be our God; God should be our God.
- Listen to this prophecy from Ezekiel about the place that Egypt should occupy.
 - Ezekiel 29:13-16
 - ¹³ "Yet, thus says the Lord GOD: 'At the end of forty years I will gather the Egyptians from the peoples among whom they were scattered. ¹⁴ I will bring back the captives of Egypt and cause them to return to the land of Pathros, to the land of their origin, and there they shall be a lowly kingdom. ¹⁵ It shall be the lowliest of kingdoms; it shall never again exalt itself above the nations, for I will diminish them so that they will not rule over the nations anymore. ¹⁶ No longer shall it be the confidence of the house of Israel, but will remind them of their iniquity when they turned to follow them. Then they shall know that I am the Lord GOD.' "
- One last application is in the area of our beliefs and understanding of religion.

Egypt and Our Religious Beliefs

- The factual knowledge that Egypt symbolizes also includes knowledge about religious things – knowledge of stories from the Lord's Word, knowledge of different doctrines and ways of understanding things.
 - Again, that's all good.
 - We need that, like the various people who went down to Egypt needed the sustenance that they got when they went down there.
- But, at some point a new Pharaoh will arise and he will feel threatened by the strength of the children of Israel.
 - Our natural self will not be a fan of our spiritual self getting stronger.
 - Our natural self will be able to tell that our spiritual self might just take control over our natural self.
 - Our spiritual self might try to say, "No, we're not going to do that because it's wrong" and our natural self will not be happy with that.
 - And so our natural self will come up with the solution of enslaving our spiritual self in service of our natural self.
 - Using religious knowledge and principles to build what our natural self wants.
 - One small example would be using our religious knowledge to show off to other people to try to make them think that we're very spiritual.
 - Another, more nefarious use, would be to use our knowledge of religious things and terminology to try to get people to trust us so that we can manipulate them and get them to do what we want.
- The temptation to use knowledge and specifically religious knowledge to serve our selfish purposes is going to be there.
 - We can try to be ready for it.

Conclusion: Know Your Enemy

- The title of this series is "Know Your Enemy".
 - We want to learn where spiritual enemies are likely to attack us from so that we can be ready to fend off their attacks.
 - What have we learned about dealing with spiritual Egyptians?
 - Facts and learning have their value but they are not necessarily a safe environment.
 - You can go down to that river to drink and eat but you need to keep on the lookout for predators.
 - This enemy is going to try to convince you to come back to them, even if you moved on a while ago – don't listen to them.
- Instead lets have confidence in our God who brought us out of the house of bondage, who wants to free us from the slavery of sin, and bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey, "a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven."
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.