

MERELY MEN:  
THE RULER-DIVINITY CULT IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

by

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*Introduction*

To survey ancient Near Eastern religions in search of evidence for ruler-divinity cults may be a fool's errand. As A. Leo Oppenheim wrote, "a systematic presentation of Mesopotamian religion cannot and should not be written."<sup>1</sup> His point is well-made. A number of factors complicate the attempt to describe ancient Near Eastern religions systematically. The number of civilizations and scope of history present a dauntingly broad collection of information. Yet while the amount of information that *should* be included in such a study is vast, the actual amount of extant information is almost too narrow to provide real value. Historical distance, natural and man-made decay, and linguistic complications – these all drastically limit the amount of actual data available to the ANE historian. According to Edwin Yamauchi, less than .006 percent of the total archaeological record has actually been uncovered and examined.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 172.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Grant R Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 129.

While there are significant limitations and challenges to the study of ANE religions, such study is not impossible. The present examination of ruler-divinity cults or divine kingship religions will proceed with reasonable caution. With the archaeological evidence available today, it appears that ruler-divinity cults were a relatively rare phenomenon in the Ancient Near East.<sup>3</sup> Ancient Egypt stands as the notable exception to this pattern and will be treated separately from and more extensively than the other civilizations.

#### *Early Mesopotamian*

The early Mesopotamian civilizations covered here are Sumerian, Akkadian, Canaanite, and Hittite. Canaanite religion serves as an umbrella for various ethnicities, but commonalities in their worship makes combination possible. This early category will use the solidification and rise of the Assyrian Empire in the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C. as a general *terminus ad quem*.

These civilization were not characterized by king-worship. Rather “all subjects of an Oriental king were his slaves.... But then, Oriental kings were slaves too – of the gods.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This study is limited to civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt through the sixth century B.C. Thus, the re-appearance of ruler-divinity cult that begins in Greek mythology and blossoms in the Roman imperial cult will not be covered. The depth and scope of that study would far exceed the limitations of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Henry Hooke, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Kingship in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 24.

## Sumerian

The Sumerians were the earliest group to form a unified political system that could be considered a true kingdom or dynasty. Meshannipadda was the first ruler of the dynasty of Ur (c. 2500 B.C). This dynasty grew weak under a series of poor kings.<sup>5</sup> It does not appear that there was time for the development of a divine kingship belief.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the clearest record of religious thought and belief from the Sumerian period. It records many mythological tales of interactions between the king Gilgamesh and the gods. Through these stories, Gilgamesh remains a human and not divine. Key to ruler-divinity cults is the idea that the ruler is in some respect immortal after his death. Gilgamesh, however, is not granted immortality upon his death.<sup>6</sup>

## Akkadian

The Akkadian kingdom was predominantly Semitic. Its first great king was Sargon the Great. Though he led a strong and effective military force, Sargon granted a fair degree of religious latitude to subjugated peoples. This resulted in a patchwork of religions and worship systems across his domain.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>6</sup> Walter R. Bodine, "Sumerians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 33.

Sargon did incorporate the divinity symbol into his name on inscriptions, as did his successors. Also, some mythology arose about his favored relationship with certain gods. In spite of these factors, however, Sargon was not considered to be a god himself.<sup>8</sup>

### Canaanite

Canaanite religion appears regularly in the biblical record. There were many tribes in Canaan: conquest records list “the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites” as kingdoms in Canaan (Josh. 3.10). Canaanite religion was largely agriculturally-focused polytheism; its gods included Baal, Yam, Astarte, Mot, Anat.<sup>9</sup> Rituals in Canaanite religion were often fertility rites, designed to induce agricultural prosperity through imitative (sympathetic) magic. As the highest citizen, the king performed priestly duties but was still seen as a human to the gods, not as divine.<sup>10</sup>

### Hittite

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>9</sup> Keith N. Schoville, “Canaanites and Amorites,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 171-72.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 175.

Hittite religion shows a step in development toward a divine kingship cult, but stops short. The Hittite king became divine upon death; there was a cult for the spirits of past kings. He was not worshiped, however, while still living. In the Hittite kingdom, "the king was the gods' appointed regent."<sup>11</sup>

### *Late Mesopotamian*

With the rise of Assyria under Tiglathpileser I, Mesopotamia's political landscape shifted from smaller dynasties, kingdoms, and tribal dominions to large, powerful empires. This portion of the survey covers the empires of Assyria, Babylon and Medo-Persia.

### Assyria

Assyrian kings maintained brief periods of rule over portions of Mesopotamia throughout the second millennium B.C., but it was not until the close of that millennium that Assyria became a genuine empire. Tiglathpileser (c. 1116-1078) turned Assyria's army into a formidable force and led it through victory after victory.<sup>12</sup> Assyria enjoyed the position of being the world power until falling to Babylon in 610 B.C.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., "Hittites," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 139-40.

<sup>12</sup> Hooke, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Kingship in the Ancient Near East and in Israel*, 115.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

In Assyrian religion, the favor and action of the gods was a key component of military success. This involved the king heavily in the national religion and service to the gods. The king, however, was a participant and not recipient in worship.<sup>14</sup>

### Babylon

During the eighteenth century, Hammurapi lead several other kings, in an early form of the Babylonian empire. Since he was not a single monarch, there was no religion devoted to his worship.<sup>15</sup>

Nebuchadnezzar I recaptured the Marduk statue from the Elamites in the twelfth century and restored Marduk to the position of most prominent deity in Babylon.<sup>16</sup> The proliferation of city-gods across Babylonia was widespread and varied. Marduk rose to a kind of henotheism above the thousands of minor gods. Worship in the ziggurats and temples was an exclusive, priests-only

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<sup>14</sup> William C. Gwaltney, Jr., "Assyrians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 101.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.



affair.<sup>17</sup> Though “the king was perceived as the official representative of the deity,” he was not included among the deities.<sup>18</sup>

A significant exception to this pattern must be noted: the statue built and worship demanded by Nebuchadnezzar II (Dan. 3). Two facts prevent the interpreter from citing this as evidence of a widespread religious phenomenon. First, Nebuchadnezzar issued an elaborate and forceful command about worship; this would not have been necessary if a divine kingship belief was prominent across the empire. Second, this story stands out as a remarkable event against a backdrop of relative tolerance. After the initial food trial, it appears that Daniel and his comrades were able to excel in the Babylonian system without significant pressure. The fiery furnace breaks into their successful political careers with almost no warning at all. Mandatory ruler-worship was not characteristic of the Babylonian empire.

### Medo-Persia

The dominant religion in the Persian empire was Zoroastrianism.<sup>19</sup>

Zoroastrianism is based on a dualism between good and evil, with both forces

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<sup>17</sup> Donald John Wiseman, ed., *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 184-85.

<sup>18</sup> Bill T. Arnold, “Babylonians,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 73.

personified to the extent that it is nearly two-god system. This religion also entails emphases on astrology, sciences, demonology, and angelology. This dualism did not lend itself to ruler-worship.

Again, an exception to this pattern appears in the biblical record: Darius' command that all prayer be directed to him and no other deity (Dan. 6). The same interpretive grid controls this narrative as controlled the fiery furnace account previously. The manner in which Darius commanded the prayer indicates that such prayer was not the normal pattern of religion in Medo-Persia. This chapter also stands out as an exception to an otherwise tolerant religious situation for Daniel. Additionally, this "ruler-worship" is entirely based on political intrigue and deceit. Once Darius realized the full import of the situation, he immediately reversed his command. This exception proves the rule: ruler-divinity cults were not widespread in the Ancient Near East.

### *Egypt*

While the other ANE civilizations had developed religious systems, Egypt did more so. Herodotus observed that the Egyptians were "beyond measure religious, more than any other nation."<sup>20</sup> Egyptian mythology promulgated the

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<sup>19</sup> Edward M. Yamauchi, "Persians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 122ff.

<sup>20</sup> James K. Hoffmeier, "Egyptians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 283.

worship of the pharaohs through two kinds of comparison. Literature and inscriptions preached the divinity of the pharaohs by assigning him divine titles and by attributing to him divine tasks.

### Divine Titles

The divine titles bestowed on pharaohs exhibit a great deal of variety. They refer to both living and dead pharaohs, they include at least four different deities, and they occur repeatedly over nearly two millennia of Egyptian history. With all this variety, however, these names communicate one message: the pharaoh is a god.

#### *Horus Incarnate*

The most unmistakable evidence for the belief in divine kingship appears in ancient Egyptian inscriptions and literature. This belief was inextricably linked with the uniting of the Upper and Lower Kingdoms at the beginning of the First Dynasty (c. 2850 B.C.).<sup>21</sup> A religious document called *The Theology of Memphis* played an explanatory role in the unification of the two kingdoms. It presented a mythology about a single deity ruling a unified kingdom in order to justify the new single king ruling a unified kingdom. In *The Theology of Memphis*,

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<sup>21</sup> Siegfried J. Schwantes, *A Short History of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 7.

Geb, a lower god, is settling a dispute between two other gods: Seth (king of Upper Egypt) and Horus (king of Lower Egypt) following the murder of Osiris (Horus's father and Seth's brother).<sup>22</sup> After assigning to each lower god half of the kingdom, Geb feels regret for rewarding Seth, who was complicit in Osiris's murder, so he gives the entire kingdom to Horus. Horus, like the pharaoh, now stands as king of a united Egypt. This legend continued through Egyptian history: subsequent pharaohs were believed to be Horus himself.<sup>23</sup>

Horus's accession to a unified throne, however, is not the deepest theological foundation of *The Theology of Memphis*. The prominent deity in this narrative is actually Ptah, "the mighty Great One ... who transmitted [*life to all gods*]." <sup>24</sup> Ptah is described with a series of eight statements identifying other deities as derivative from Ptah.<sup>25</sup> Geb's decision about Horus and Seth is taken to Ptah. Ptah reinforces the verdict by designating Horus to serve as his own heart /

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<sup>22</sup> Ted Peters, "Monotheism and Kingship in Ancient Memphis: A Study in Egyptian Mythology," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 4, no. 2 (June 1, 1977): 162.

<sup>23</sup> Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society & Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 37; Samuel Alfred Browne Mercer, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt*, The Oriental Research Series (London: Luzac, 1949), 251.

<sup>24</sup> James Bennett Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Peters, 157.

mind.<sup>26</sup> The imprimatur of the primary deity strengthens the pharaoh's claim to be divine by confirming the mythological accession narrative of the gods.<sup>27</sup>

*Osiris Himself*

Starting with the First Dynasty, living kings were identified with Horus; dead kings were identified with Osiris. As noted previously, Osiris was Horus's father, murdered in a plot involving his brother Seth. According to *The Pyramid Texts*, one of oldest extant collections of religious writings (c. 3000 B.C.), the recently dead pharaoh "sittest upon the throne of Osiris."<sup>28</sup> To twelve different gods, the pharaoh is introduced as Osiris upon his arrival in the underworld.<sup>29</sup> The pharaoh is equated with Osiris again when *The Pyramid Texts* call Geb his father.<sup>30</sup>

Given the prevalence of ancestor worship in pagan religions, it is not hard to accept the normalcy of worshiping the dead pharaoh. The pyramids stand as

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<sup>26</sup> Pritchard, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Peters mistakenly refers to this theology as "monotheism" (155), but it is better understood as a sort of primitive henotheism, as in George Cyril Ring, "The God of Egypt's Wise Men," *Theological Studies* 1, no. 3 (S 1940): 251.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Alfred Browne Mercer, trans., "The Pyramid Texts," n.d., Utterance 213, Line 134, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/pyt/> (accessed November 18, 2010)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Utterance 219, Lines 167-179.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Utterance 373, Lines 655, 657.

a testimony to the worship given to the deceased pharaohs. Egyptians considered these monuments to be “station[s] for transitional or spiritual events” and believed that buried wealth, magical incantations, symbolic artwork, and burial rituals would facilitate the pharaoh’s passing into his divine afterlife.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the pyramids served more as temples than as tombs in Egyptian religions. The worship of deceased pharaohs as Osiris may be the most certain aspect of the divine kingship cult. Even though Mercer is unsure whether pharaohs were viewed as gods during their lifetimes, he confidently asserts that “the worship of the deceased pharaoh may be found on every page of the religious history of ancient Egypt.”<sup>32</sup>

*Son of Re, Son of Amon-Re*

Horus was not the only deity that served as a basis for the Egyptian ruler divinity cult. The pharaoh’s claim to divinity was also based on identification with the sun-god Re. Nearly fifteen hundred years after *The Theology of Memphis* and *The Pyramid Texts*, at the start of the Twelfth Dynasty, the divinity of the pharaoh still figured prominently in Egyptian literature. In *The Instruction of King Amen-em-Het*, Pharaoh Amen-em-het I introduces himself as “the Son of

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<sup>31</sup> Donald B. Redford, *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 364.

<sup>32</sup> Mercer, *Religion*, 253.

Re.”<sup>33</sup> He then prefaces his letter of instruction to his son and successor with these words: “Thou that hast appeared as a god, hearken to what I have to say to thee, that thou mayest be king of the land and ruler of the regions, that thou mayest achieve an overabundance of good.”<sup>34</sup> Pritchard notes that this letter was still being copied regularly for at least eight hundred years after Amen-em-het’s death.<sup>35</sup>

Two generations later, the author of *The Divine Attributes of Pharaoh* calls his readers to reverence with these words: “Worship King Ni-maat-re, living forever, within your bodies and associate with his majesty in your hearts.”<sup>36</sup> The pharaoh is worthy of that adoration because “he is Re, by whose beams one sees, He is the one who illumines the Two Lands more than the sun disc.”<sup>37</sup> Brighter than the sun itself, the pharaoh is the sun-god and, therefore, deserves worship.

With the imperial expansion of Thutmose III, the worship of Amon grew to prominence in Egypt. This did not damage the Re-based worship of the

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<sup>33</sup> Pritchard, *ANET*, 418.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Pritchard, *ANET*, 431.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

pharaoh, however. Egyptian polytheism simply syncretized the two deities over time and venerated the pharaoh as the son of Amon-Re.<sup>38</sup>

### Divine Tasks

#### *Victory*

Looking to gods for aid and victory in battle was common to nearly every ancient Near Eastern civilization. The Old Testament is replete with examples of Yahweh's triumphs over the pagan deities of Israel's neighbors.<sup>39</sup> Ancient nations viewed military exploits as demonstrations of the superiority of one nation's deity over another's.

In Egyptian military records, the victorious pharaoh, Seti I (c. 1300 B.C.), is described in deified terms:

Live the Horus: Mighty Bull, Appearing in Thebes, Making the Two Lands to Live; the Two Goddesses: Repeating Births, Mighty of Arm, Repelling the Nine Bows; the Horus of Gold: Repeating Appearances, Might of Bows in All Lands; the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands: Men-maat-Re [Ir]-en-Re; the Son of Re, Lord of Diadems: Seti Mer-ne-Ptah, beloved of Re-Har-akhti, the great god.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ring, "The God of Egypt's Wise Men," 267.

<sup>39</sup> E.g., Dagon – I Sam. 5; Ba'al – I Kings 18; Rabshakeh – II Kings 18-19; Yahweh's fame – Neh. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Pritchard, *ANET*, 253.



This description brims with divine titles, not merely because of Seti's position, but because of his action. The author continues by describing Seti's military prowess: "valiant warrior in the very heart of the fray," "terrible in combat," and he who "causes to *retreat* the princes of Syria."<sup>41</sup>

A little more than a century later, Ramses III successfully repelled the advances of "the Peoples of the Sea." The records describe his frightful appearance and ferocity on the battlefield, then compare his valor with an Egyptian myth about the god "Seth destroying the serpent [named] 'Evil of Character,'" attributing Ramses's success to divine power: "It is Amon-Re who has overthrown for him the lands."<sup>42</sup>

Comparing the pharaoh's victories to mythological victories and crediting the gods with his military exploits furthered the idea that the pharaoh was a god himself. In Egyptian life, the pharaohs and the gods shared the duty to protect the country.

*Ma'at*

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 263.

Similar to the Hebrew *shalom*, ma'at is "the order established by the act of creation ... which has to be preserved or re-instituted."<sup>43</sup> Ma'at included such values and ideas as justice, virtue, order, ethics, truth, and fairness. Ma'at formed a necessary link in the chain between pharaoh and god. Engnell cites a late thirteenth-century enthronement hymn. In this passage, Merneptah receives divine titles and praise because his reign is characterized by truth and righteousness:

Singers of praise come to his throne,  
 he, the king, the lord of millions of years,  
 great of kingship like Horus, Merneptah, beloved of Amun,  
 who "oppresseth" Egypt with festivals,  
 the song of Re', more glorious than any other king,  
 Merneptah, contented with Truth.  
 All the righteous (say): Come and behold:  
 the sinners are fallen on their faces,  
 al that are covetous are turned back.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, hope for ma'at abounds at the accession of Ramses IV:  
 They who were naked are clothed in fine linen; they who were dirty are clad in white.  
 They who were in prison are set free; they who were fettered are in joy.  
 The troublemakers in this land have become peaceful.  
 .....  
 The King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Heqa-maat-Re Setep-en-Amon – life, prosperity, health! – wears the White Crown again; the Son of Re: Ramses

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<sup>43</sup> Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, trans. Ann E. Keep (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 114.

<sup>44</sup> Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 13-14.

*Heqa*-maat – life, prosperity, health! – has taken over the office of his father!<sup>45</sup>

Because their reigns are (allegedly) full of righteousness and free from sin, Merneptah and Ramses IV are praised and titled with the names of deities: Horus, Amun (Amon), and Re' (Re). Both military protection and just rule connected the pharaohs to the gods and convinced people to worship them.

*Conclusion: Biblical Significance*

As a rule, ancient Near Eastern religions were not characterized by divine kingship cults. Egypt is the significant exception; its politics and religion were inseparably linked by the belief that the pharaohs were divine. This has ramifications for biblical exegesis.

First, against the canvas of the pharaoh's divinity, the plagues on Egypt take on special significance. It will not do to summarily chalk them up to impersonal attacks on Egypt's false deities. The plagues constituted a very personal attack on Pharaoh: the man who pretended to be a god. The initial plagues were custom-designed to show the impotence of Egypt's pantheon, but the final two plagues targeted Pharaoh directly. The darkness across the land (Ex. 10.21-29) dealt a solid blow to the man whom everyone believed to be Re incarnate, the sun-god in human form. The death of the firstborn did not just

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<sup>45</sup> Pritchard, *ANET*, 379.

grieve Pharaoh personally; it shook his religious outlook by killing the next supposedly divine king. A key detail in the Osiris-Horus myth is Horus's work to attempt his father's rescue. With the death of his firstborn son, that story no longer held comfort for Pharaoh. His son was dead; who would rescue or avenge Pharaoh if that need arose?

The Egyptian pharaoh cult also sheds light on the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. If he was a god, it was his job to protect his country and to maintain *ma'at* for his citizens. Oppressing the rapidly-growing Hebrew nation was part of that protection and provision. To Pharaoh, withstanding the perceived encroachment of Yahweh on his realm was simply part of being a good king and guarding Egypt's *ma'at*. Since Pharaoh resisted God's miracles and tried to protect his country against God, the plagues escalated from attacks on mythological deities to attacks on Pharaoh's own proclaimed divinity.

Second, since the surrounding nations (and the conquering ones) were not forcing the worship of a human king on the Israelites, it must be maintained that Yahweh's lawsuit against those nations was not argued on the grounds a primarily political problem, but on the grounds of religious idolatry. In other words, liberation theologians should not read the Old Testament as a long narrative of politically oppressed people fighting against government-rooted evils. When God takes his people's side against an empire, he often does so to

vindicate his name over the false gods. Even when the Egyptian ruler-divinity cult figured prominently into the Exodus story, the issue was idolatry, not pure politics. Throughout the Ancient Near East, religio-political oppression is absent from the historical record; it should not be imported into the biblical record either.

Third, the New Testament authors were grounded in the theology of the Old Testament. These findings affect New Testament exegesis. God did not overthrow Egypt's entire system of government at the Exodus: he delivered his people and humiliated a proud idolater.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, when Paul is faced with a Roman empire that demands worship be given to its governmental head, the responsible exegete will not assume automatically that Paul will respond with notions of subversion and political upheaval. Sadly, some scholars are proposing that very idea: Paul's letters covertly oppose the Roman government and advocate its toppling.<sup>47</sup> If those authors were truly interpreting Paul in light of his *Jewish* background, such conclusions would not occur to them.

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<sup>46</sup> Drowning the Egyptian pharaoh and army did indeed remove those people from their positions in the government. However, the pharaoh system including its cultic aspects, continued after the Exodus.

<sup>47</sup> John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 15-16.

For both Old and New Testament studies, the rarity of ruler-divinity cults in the Ancient Near East is significant. In the Old Testament, the exceptional presence of ruler-worship sheds light on certain passages and its absence sets limitations on the exegesis of others. Understanding how God responded to the cult in Egypt also informs the interpretation of Paul's writings in connection with the Roman imperial cult.

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