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## “AND UPON ALL THE GODS OF EGYPT I WILL EXECUTE JUDGMENT”: THE EGYPTIAN DEITY IN THE TEN PLAGUES

### INTRODUCTION

In Exodus 12:12, God tells Moses and Aaron that He will “execute judgment on all the Egyptian deities.” In order to understand how God carried out this promise, the account of the ten plagues has to be read in light of ancient Egyptian religious beliefs. Some commentators have done that, generally suggesting that each of the plagues was targeted at a different Egyptian deity.<sup>1</sup> But over time the ancient Egyptians had as many as two thousand deities.<sup>2</sup> If the Egyptians did not associate each plague with the deity suggested by the commentators, they would not have gotten God’s message.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Ziony Zevit, “Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues.” *Torah History Daily*, July 17, 2011, 16-23, 42 (Accessible at <<http://members.bib-arch.org/publication.asp?PubID=BSBR&Volume=6&Issue=3&ArticleID=13>>).

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Cottrell, *Life Under the Pharaohs* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), 22.

<sup>3</sup> For example, it is not clear which deity Egyptians would have associated with the first plague. The general view appears to be that the plague attacked the god of the Nile, or that the Nile itself was a god. See, e.g., Zevit, “Three Ways,” and Joseph H.

This article discusses passages in the Torah's<sup>4</sup> narrative of the ten plagues that can readily be associated with Egyptian worship of the goddess of war, plague, and pestilence, Sekhmet, and suggests that God used this deity as the focal point of His defeat of the Egyptian deities.<sup>5</sup> Ancient Egyptians prayed to Sekhmet to refrain from attacking them and asked her, instead, to inflict plagues and destruction on their enemies. When God showed that neither Sekhmet nor the rest of the Egyptian pantheon could protect the Egyptians from the plagues or exact revenge on the Israelites, He demonstrated the futility of the Egyptians' faith in them.<sup>6</sup>

The role of Sekhmet worship in the Exodus narrative begins with the first plague, in which God turned the Nile's water to blood (Exodus 7:19ff.). At first blush, the reason God attacked the Nile seems obvious: it was the very lifeline of the Egyptians.<sup>7</sup> But why, then, did He not inflict long-term damage on the great river? After all, that would have shattered the Egyptian economy and inflicted a famine from which the Egyptians might never have recovered. But evidently that was not God's plan. If God only wanted to contaminate the Nile to begin degrading the health of the Egyptians, why choose blood over other potential contaminants? And why choose a motif - the bloody Nile - that was reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian myth, the "Destruction of Humanity"? That would have only prompted the Egyptians to attribute the blood to more slaughter by their murderous and bloodthirsty goddess Sekhmet, not to a God whom they had never heard of.

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Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1993), 400. However, Egyptologists who have written about ancient Egyptian theology note that the two gods associated with the Nile, Hapi, and Khnum, were gods of the Nile inundation, not of the Nile itself. See Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 106-08, 194-95. But the first plague did not involve the unusually high or low inundations that typically caused famines in Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> As used in this paper, "Torah" refers to the Five Books of Moses. Translations of Torah passages quoted in this paper are generally taken from the Judaica Press edition.

<sup>5</sup> We may assume that the Egyptians sought relief from other gods as well. But they likely paid far more attention to Sekhmet, particularly since she was also looked to as the goddess of healing.

<sup>6</sup> In the author's view, a biblical connection between the ten plagues narrative and Sekhmet worship testifies to the realism of the Torah's account in the context of ancient Egyptian history. In offering this analysis, the author does not mean to suggest that all the historical questions associated with the Torah have been resolved. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that more evidence of the Torah's historicity is embedded within the biblical narrative and remains to be uncovered.

<sup>7</sup> Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Random House, 2010), 15. For a picturesque portrayal of the extensive boat traffic on the Nile, see Cottrell, *Life Under the Pharaohs*, 45.

Yet that may be exactly what God intended. There is reason to believe that He wanted the Egyptians to assume that the bloody Nile was caused by the lion-headed Sekhmet. This would lead them to focus their prayers for relief and vengeance on this mighty goddess. Over the course of the next nine plagues, the futility of their prayers should have become increasingly clear. The ultimate repudiation of the Egyptian deities came in the tenth plague. There, God prevented “the Destroyer” (“*ha-mashhit*” in Exodus 12:13, 23) from attacking the Israelite houses that had the blood of the Paschal lamb smeared on their lintels and doorposts. The deity the ancient Egyptians called “the Destroyer” was Sekhmet.

### Sekhmet

A brief review of the religious beliefs in ancient Egypt helps us understand the ancient Egyptians’ mindset as they were confronted by the ten plagues. The ancient Egyptians were in awe of the manifestations of nature. Like all humans, they knew they were at nature’s mercy. The sun gave them a sense of time and constancy but could not ensure peace and tranquility. The Nile sustained them through annual inundations, but “high” and “low” Niles could bring famine and disrupt the social order. Animals could be docile or hostile but had powers the Egyptians could neither fathom nor control.

Consequently, the Egyptians conceived and worshipped gods through whom they hoped to appease and moderate the forces of nature. Although the Egyptians did not worship the Nile itself, they worshipped the gods of the inundation.<sup>8</sup> They prayed to deities who had manifestations of animal power for good or bad – for example, the falcon-headed supreme sun-god Ra,<sup>9</sup> the motherly, cow-headed Hathor,<sup>10</sup> and the raging lion-headed Sekhmet.

<sup>8</sup> Geraldine Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 3, 136.

<sup>9</sup> The notion that some knowledge of ancient Egyptian religious beliefs is important to understanding portions of the Torah is borne out by the insight it brings to God’s creation of day and light even before He created the sun (and moon) (Genesis 1:3, 14-19). It is as if to differentiate Jewish beliefs from cultures such as those of ancient Egypt that believed in essence that the sun was the prime mover in Creation. Rabbi David Silber notes that the Torah’s account of Creation seems “purposefully designed to counter popular legends of the ancient Near East [Egypt included] that describe creation as a great struggle of primordial forces from which one god emerges supreme” (David Silber, *A Passover Haggada: Go Forth and Learn* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), 96, citing Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961), 7-12).

<sup>10</sup> Pinch, *Handbook*, 123.

At some point in time, their beliefs coalesced into a common creation legend and then into a more or less cohesive belief system.<sup>11</sup> The names and attributes of the creator gods changed over time, but some themes remained fairly constant: Ra was supreme, and the king – called “Pharaoh” since the Eighteenth Dynasty – was himself (or herself) believed by the Egyptians to be a kind of deity.<sup>12</sup>

Sekhmet was one of the most powerful Egyptian deities. The daughter of Ra and the consort of Ptah, one of Egypt’s creator gods, she was directly associated with plagues, which were often called the “messengers” or “slaughterers” of Sekhmet.<sup>13</sup> Egypt’s goddess of war and destruction,<sup>14</sup> Sekhmet carried out Ra’s decisions to have Egyptians or their foes killed. Sekhmet shared Ptah’s cult center in Memphis, long Egypt’s administrative capital.

Sekhmet was the wrathful alter ego of the goddess Hathor, perhaps Egypt’s most popular deity.<sup>15</sup> As daughters of Ra, they were both referred to as the “Eye of Ra.”<sup>16</sup> Because Sekhmet inflicted plagues and destruction, she also came to be asked to protect Egypt by turning her wrath on its enemies and curing Egyptians of the effects of plagues and illness.<sup>17</sup> When the Egyptians prayed for healing, they often prayed to Sekhmet.

The “Destruction of Humanity” myth may have laid the foundation for Sekhmet to be known as “the Destroyer.”<sup>18</sup> According to this myth, Ra decided to destroy humanity because the Egyptians failed to pay him proper respect. He commanded his daughter, the “Eye of Ra,” to wreak

<sup>11</sup> Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61.

<sup>12</sup> Adolf Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, trans. Tirard (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 57.

<sup>13</sup> Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses*, 181.

<sup>14</sup> Donald A. Mackenzie, *Egyptian Myth and Legend* (London: Gresham Publishing Co., 1913), xxxviii.

<sup>15</sup> Kasia Szpakowska, *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt: Recreating Life* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 124.

<sup>16</sup> For other deities associated with this role, see Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Szpakowska, *Daily Life*, 124. See, also, Warren C. Robertson, *Drought, Famine, Plague and Pestilence* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2010), 150-52.

<sup>18</sup> Like other ancient myths, it is hard to tell when the “Destruction of Humanity” myth originated. Its earliest known appearance is in The Book of the Heavenly Cow, found in the outer shrine of Tutankhamen (1336-1327 BCE). Some scholars date the text to as early as the Twelfth Dynasty (1985-1773 BCE). Anthony Spalinger, who believes the myth may have first been put in writing during the reign of Amenhotep III (1390-1352 BCE), seems to say that the myth itself – as opposed to the written narrative – predated the Middle Kingdom (i.e., it may have originated before 2055 BCE) (See Anthony Spalinger, “The Destruction of Mankind: A Transitional Literary Text,” in *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 28 [2000], 268).

vengeance on the Egyptians. She did his bidding and waded in her victims' blood. Ra later changed his mind about destroying humanity. In order to subdue Sekhmet,<sup>19</sup> Ra ordered that a large quantity of a red substance be ground up and mixed into 7,000 jars of beer, turning the beer the color of blood. The beer was then poured onto fields, presumably the fields of inundation along the banks of the Nile. Attracted by the "blood," Sekhmet drank the mixture, became drunk and was subdued.<sup>20</sup>

Another myth, the "Distant Goddess," depicted the desert as Sekhmet's natural habitat. This myth related that Sekhmet openly defied Ra's authority by traveling to the desert and destroying everything she encountered. One or more gods finally persuaded her to return to Ra.<sup>21</sup>

This combination of destructive and protective qualities, and her role as the goddess of plagues and pestilence, made Sekhmet the ideal instrument for God to use to demonstrate His supreme authority, to the exclusion of that of the Egyptian gods.

### The Ten Plagues

In Judaism, the ten plagues are the paradigmatic display of the hand of God. They had many purposes. The Torah tells us they were designed to (a) punish the Egyptians for their idol-worship and for oppressing/enslaving the Israelites (Genesis 15:14); (b) demonstrate God's wonders and signs to the Israelites, in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and have the exodus serve as an eternal record for the Jewish people of the wonders God performed to secure their release from bondage (Exodus 10:2); (c) demonstrate to Pharaoh and the Egyptians that God is one and omnipotent (e.g., Exodus 12:12); and (d) ultimately, cause Pharaoh and the Egyptians to send the Israelites out of Egypt. The plagues also delivered a message to the significant portion of Israelites in Egypt who were steeped in Egyptian culture and worshipped the Egyptian deities (Joshua 24:14 and Ezekiel 20:7-8) to repent and return to the worship of God.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The myth initially identifies Hathor as the "eye of Ra" sent to destroy humanity. But the rampaging deity becomes known as Sekhmet. Spalinger observes that Sekhmet is introduced in lines 58-60: "Thus came into existence Sekhmet, the breadpaster of night" (*hpr Shmt pw sbbt n grh*) in order to wade in their blood from Herakleopolis on" (Spalinger, "Destruction of Mankind," 266; see also Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, 268).

<sup>20</sup> Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, 265-269; and Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 74-76, 130.

<sup>21</sup> Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 71-72.

<sup>22</sup> Maimonides held that "the principal purpose of the whole [body of Jewish law] was the removal and utter destruction of idolatry." *The Guide of the Perplexed*

The Torah quotes God as assuring Moses and Aaron that He will “execute judgment” on all the Egyptian gods (Exodus 12:12). With that statement in mind, the great Talmudic sage R. Yehuda asserted that the importance of each plague was that it challenged the supremacy of the Egyptian deities.<sup>23</sup> R. Yehuda divided the plagues into three groups, the first three (bloody Nile, frogs, and lice), the middle three (flying insects/ wild animals, pestilence, and boils) and the last four (fiery hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the first-born). His grouping of the plagues helps us see how God systematically carried out His promise to execute judgment.<sup>24</sup>

*Bloody Nile, Frogs, and Lice*

The first plague is clearly reminiscent of the “Destruction of Humanity” myth in ancient Egyptian theology. As a result, Pharaoh and the Egyptians likely prayed to Sekhmet to stop her murderous rampage, and they continued appealing to Sekhmet as the plagues progressed and intensified.

The second and third plagues flowed in a natural sequence from the first, but in each case intensified to cause awe and make them “signs and wonders” (Deuteronomy 4:34). The frog invasion was a compound demonstration of God’s power. Frogs frequently appeared after Nile inundations as a natural phenomenon, one that the Egyptians considered an omen of fertility.<sup>25</sup> Yet, if the Nile had become contaminated naturally, the contaminant would have either caused the frogs to leave the river immediately or killed them. Here, seven days passed before the frogs emerged (Exodus 7:25), and the magnitude of the frog swarm was supernatural.<sup>26</sup> Although there is no direct connection between the second

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of *Maimonides* (M. Friedlander, trans. & ed.) (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1885), Vol. 3, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Nachman Cohen, *The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Disputes and Perspectives: R. Yehuda and R. Nechemia* (New York: Torah Lishmah Institute, 2007), 168.

<sup>24</sup> The plagues have been grouped and analyzed in numerous ways. See, e.g., Nachman Cohen, (*The Historical Haggada*. New York: Torah Lishmah Institute, 2002), 60-67; and Zevit, “Three Ways.” Rashi, commenting on Exodus 7:17 and citing the *Midrash Tanhuma*, says: “Since rain does not fall in the land of Egypt and the Nile rises and irrigates the land, the Egyptians worship the Nile. God therefore struck down their deity and then He struck them down.” See also *Exodus Rabbah* 9:9.

<sup>25</sup> Hertz, *The Pentateuch*, 400.

<sup>26</sup> The Malbim on Exodus 7:2 took note of those who saw in the plagues only a natural progression: blood in the Nile caused it to stink from dead, rotting fish, which caused swarms of frogs to flee from the river and enter the Egyptians’ homes, after which decaying blood and frogs caused an infestation of lice. He criticized them for minimizing the miracles that enhanced the plagues.

plague and Sekhmet in the Torah narrative, the word “*negef*,” meaning “plague,” appears in connection with that plague (Exodus 7:27) and only one other, the tenth plague where Sekhmet is explicitly referred to.<sup>27</sup>

The last plague in this group, an infestation of lice, could have been a natural (albeit magnified) progression from the dead, rotting fish and frogs. It marked an escalation in the plagues in that the magicians were unable to replicate it. This is one of the only two plagues where no direct or veiled association with Sekhmet is apparent in the Torah narrative.

*Insect Swarms (or Wild Animals), Pestilence, and Boils*

These three plagues primarily attacked the Egyptians and their animals. The fourth plague also brought God’s message to the Egyptians to a new level, whereby He began to protect the Israelites from the plagues.

The nature of the fourth plague, “*arov*,” is debated among the rabbinic sages. R. Nehemya says it was an attack of mosquitoes, gnats, and wasps. R. Yehuda says that *arov* refers to a mixture of wild animals (as do many commentators).<sup>28</sup> Since lions were prominent among the wild animals, according to some commentators,<sup>29</sup> this interpretation of *arov* would call to mind the lioness-headed Sekhmet.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the Torah uses the reflexive verb *tishahet* (“will be destroyed”), to describe the damage inflicted on Egyptian land. This word is derived from the same root as *ha-mashhit* (“the Destroyer”), the term that appears in the tenth plague and, as shown below, was an epithet for Sekhmet.

<sup>27</sup> The word “*negef*” is used in several other places in the Torah. One is Exodus 30:12, where Moses is commanded to conduct a census. Rashi explains that there was a fear that counting people would be a bad omen – “*ayin ha-ra*,” commonly translated as the “evil eye” – that could bring on a plague. Someone familiar with Egyptian mythology might interpret “*ayin ha-ra*” literally as “the eye of Ra,” another reference to Sekhmet. Whether “*ayin ha-ra*” has roots in Egyptian culture is speculative and beyond the scope of this paper. (See Rivka Ulmer, *The Evil Eye in the Torah and in Rabbinic Literature* [New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, 1994], 4, n. 12).

<sup>28</sup> *Exodus Rabbah* 11:3.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., commentary by Ibn Ezra on Exodus 8:17.

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps R. Nehemya and R. Yehuda had different traditions, each viewing the biblical text from a different perspective. R. Nehemya’s may have been the literal interpretation, whereas R. Yehuda’s tradition of *arov* as wild animals may be allegorical and reflect the Egyptians’ belief that they were being attacked by their own deities, many of which were iconized as having animal-like features (e.g., lions [Sekhmet], rams [Amun and Khnum], and jackals [Anubis]). It seems clear that the statement in Exodus 8:20 that “*tishahet ha-arets mi-penei be-arov*” (“the land was destroyed because of the *arov*”), and for that matter the phrase “which devoured them” in Psalms 78:45, was not taken literally by the commentators; for example, Seferno asserts that the first six plagues did not inflict lasting damage on the Egyptians).



Since Sekhmet was the goddess of pestilence, it would have been natural for Pharaoh and the Egyptians to pray to her for relief from the fifth plague, pestilence. The sixth plague, “*shelín*” - translated as boils – attacked humans and cattle (Exodus 9:10). There is no obvious connection in the Torah narrative between Sekhmet and this plague, which may not have been a separate disease but rather symptoms of diseases inflicted by earlier plagues.

*Fiery Hail, Locusts, Darkness, and Deaths of the First-Born*

The final four plagues inflicted a series of devastating supernatural disasters designed to lead the Egyptians to believe that their most important gods were abandoning (and possibly attacking) them.<sup>31</sup>

Storms were greatly feared by the Egyptians.<sup>32</sup> The seventh plague, fiery hail, was a particularly invidious plague, one that clearly did not occur naturally. It came from the sky, the mythological domain of Ra, Sekhmet’s father.

Pharaoh’s reaction when first threatened with the eighth plague, locusts, strongly suggests that he and the Egyptians were looking to Sekhmet for help. Initially, he was willing to let the Israelites go into the desert to make sacrifices to God. But he accompanied that with a threat that revealed a sinister purpose: “*re’u ki ra’ah neged peneikhem* (“see that evil is before you”) (Exodus 10:10). Commenting on that passage, Rashi cites an unidentified midrash to explain that in Egyptian “astrology” there was a star named “*ra’ah*” that was associated with blood and murder. Thus, the midrash understood Pharaoh to be telling Moses and Aaron that his gods would attack the Israelites in the desert.<sup>33</sup> However, the ancient Egyptians

<sup>31</sup> Although this point is beyond the scope of this paper, I will note that some of the plagues may have caused the Egyptians to believe that their own gods were attacking them. Thus, for example, the major deity Seth, who at an early point came to represent the forces of disturbance and confusion in the world, was depicted, among other things, as an animal with a jackal-like head (Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses*, 197-99). Seth was also a storm god, whom the Egyptians might have associated with the seventh plague (See Stephen Quirke, *The Cult of Ra: Sun-Worship in Ancient Egypt* [New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001], 37-38).

<sup>32</sup> Hoffmeier comments: “[T]hunderstorms were especially feared in Egypt and thought to be wonders or miracles... The belief that rain and storms were the result of divine activity is reflected in a stela erected at Karnak during the reign of Ahmose (ca. 1538). A devastating storm struck Egypt, according to the text, a storm thought to be associated with the cataclysmic eruption of the Aegean island of Thera (Santoris) by Karen Foster and Robert Ritner” (James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 150).

<sup>33</sup> Cassuto also finds a possible connection to Egyptian deities. Noting that the Hebrew “*ra’ah*” as used in Exodus 10:10 might refer to the Egyptian sun god Ra,



worshipped deities, not stars.<sup>34</sup> In Egyptian mythology, the only deity that was bloodthirsty, murderous and dwelled in the desert was Sekhmet.<sup>35</sup> It bears note that Rashi's comment on Exodus 10:10 adds a parallel comment on Exodus 32:12, which quotes Moses' argument in pleading with God not to destroy the Israelites for having made the golden calf: "Why should the Egyptians say: 'He brought them out with evil [intent] [*be-ra'ah*]' to kill them in the mountains and to annihilate them from upon the face of the earth?" In effect, Rashi is interpreting the point Moses made there to mean that the Egyptians will say that God, the Israelites' own deity, sent Sekhmet to destroy them, as Pharaoh warned Moses.

The eighth plague was a foretaste of the ninth plague, total darkness. The Torah uses the following phrase to describe how the locust swarm will obscure the earth: "*ve-kisa et ein ha-arets*" ("and it will cover the eye of the land") (Exodus 10:5). We are struck by the unusual term "*ein ha-arets*." If the passage means that the sun was obscured, it could have said so explicitly (as the Torah did in Exodus 8:2, describing the frog plague). The Kabbalists understood the "eye of the land" to be referring to Egyptian mythology, signifying that the Egyptian deities were incapacitated.<sup>36</sup> Now we know something they would not have known: in Egyptian mythology Sekhmet was one of the deities referred to as "the eye of the sun."<sup>37</sup>

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he comments that Pharaoh might be telling Moses, "my god will rise against you" (Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961], 125-26). The author wishes to thank Rachel Friedman for calling this to his attention.

<sup>34</sup> The true nature of Egyptian religious practices was evidently not generally known in Rashi's time. The notion that the Egyptians were star worshipers can be found in nineteenth century writings (see, e.g., Thomas Birch, *The Works of Ralph Cudworth, D.D. The True Intellectual System of the Universe, Sermons, Etc.* [Oxford: D.A. Talboys, 1829], vol. 2, 121). Egypt did have star deities at one point in the development of its theology, but they were minor deities that do not appear to have been worshipped directly (Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses*, 90-91).

<sup>35</sup> Other Egyptian goddesses were called the "eye" or "daughter" of Ra at various times, including Bastet, Hathor, Mut, Sekhmet, Tefnut, and Wadjet. (Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 61). Sekhmet was the most important of the leonine deities (Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses*, 181). Of the others worth comment, Bastet started to be depicted as a cat starting from Middle Kingdom times (ca. 2055-1650 BCE) (*Ibid.*, 178), Hathor was most often depicted in bovine form (*Ibid.*, 143) and Mut was considered the Theban counterpart of Sekhmet but her primary representation was anthropomorphic (*Ibid.*, 154).

<sup>36</sup> Yaakov Culi, *The Torah Anthology Me'am Lo'ez* (trans. A. Kaplan) (New York: Moznaim Publishing House, 1979), vol. 5, 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> The phrase "eye of the sun" appears in the translation of Exodus 10:5 by Onkelos: "*ve-kassei yat ein shamsha de-ar'a*," which literally means "and it covered the eye of the sun of the earth."

The ninth plague, darkness, is interpreted by many sources, Rabbinic and secular, as the negation of the power of Sekhmet's father, Ra.<sup>38</sup>

This brings us to the tenth plague. Here, God almost explicitly identifies Sekhmet as his target. He refers twice to a "*mashhit*," which means "Destroyer" (Exodus 12:13 and 23):

13. And the blood will be for you for a sign upon the houses where you will be, and I will see the blood and skip over you, and there will be no plague for the Destroyer [to inflict] when I smite the [people of the] land of Egypt.
23. The Lord will pass to smite the Egyptians, and He will see the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, and the Lord will pass over the entrance, and He will not permit the Destroyer to enter your houses to smite [you].

These two phrases refer to the same *Mashhit*" (Destroyer). But the two passages convey essentially the same message: God will skip over the houses where blood is smeared on the lintels and doorposts, and He will not allow the "Destroyer" to attack those houses.

The Rabbinic commentaries were clearly puzzled by the term "Destroyer." Some say it means the act of killing the first-born.<sup>39</sup> Others view it in strangely supernatural terms, saying that it refers to demons that, once set loose on the world, kill indiscriminately during the night.<sup>40</sup> Yet others see it as a reference to an angel who always accompanies God.<sup>41</sup> However, the Passover Haggadah tells us that God Himself carried out this plague; He did not act through another being or entity. Hence,

<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 35.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., comment of Seforno on Exodus 12:23: "[The destroyer] of the Egyptian nation, with [God's] anger, wrath, fury, etc."

<sup>40</sup> A fascinating Rashi explains that "the Destroyer" was a demon that, once set loose, kills at night and does not differentiate between the righteous and the wicked (citing the *Mekhilta*). God did not want these demons to kill Jews, lest the Egyptians claim that God could not protect the Jews (or, in the context of the analysis presented here, that Sekhmet killed them). Nahmanides said that "the Destroyer" refers to the angel that destroys at the time of a plague (citing 2 Samuel 24:16), while at the same time acknowledging of course that God Himself killed the Egyptian first-born. It could be argued that "*mashhit*" refers to the organism that carried the plague, e.g., a flea, if it was the bubonic plague. But in 2 Samuel 24:16, the only other Biblical passage that mentions an entity separate from God in connection with a plague, a destroying angel ("*malakh ha-mashhit*") is explicitly identified as the bearer of that plague.

<sup>41</sup> *Da'at Zekeinim* on Exodus 12:23.

“*ha-mashhit*” cannot denote an entity separate from God that participated in inflicting the deaths.

Why, then, does the Torah mention the “Destroyer”? Because God used Sekhmet, the powerful, murderous “eye of Ra,”<sup>42</sup> as the proxy for “all the gods of Egypt” in driving home this final demonstration of His supremacy over them and in repudiating their power, if not their very existence.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, our interpretation of the Torah narrative helps explain why Exodus 12:13 and 23 were both needed, even though they appear to convey the same message twice. In 12:13, God gives his basic assurance that He will not allow the Destroyer to kill any Israelites in their homes. The knowledge that Sekhmet was the “Destroyer” makes the test of faith embodied in 12:23 even more powerful than we previously realized, God’s instruction to smear blood on the lintels and doorposts likely plunged idol-worshipping Israelites into shock and fear. After all, blood was the very substance that would attract the murderous Sekhmet to them! Nevertheless they complied, and in doing so they demonstrated their trust in God and proved themselves worthy of redemption from Egypt.

### Summary

There is every reason to believe that God used Sekhmet as the representative of the Egyptian pantheon in “executing judgment” on the Egyptian deities. She is strongly identified with the template for the first plague, the “Destruction of Humanity Myth,” and almost certainly “the Destroyer” whom God prevents from harming Israelites in their houses in the tenth plague. Thus, as the plagues intensified, God demonstrated that Sekhmet, and through her the entire Egyptian pantheon, was powerless to protect the Egyptians and to wreak vengeance on the Israelites.

<sup>42</sup> The term “*aryeh mashhit*” appears in Jeremiah 2:30 (see, also, *Ibid.* 4:7). This could be a coincidence, but it might signify a tradition that associated the “*mashhit*” in Exodus with the lioness goddess Sekhmet.

<sup>43</sup> The deity name “Sekhmet” could be transliterated as S-[Y]-H-M-T, with the first letter as a *sin*, since the Hebrew letters *samekh* and *sin* are interchangeable. As such, it could be an anagram of the Hebrew word for “the Destroyer,” M-Š-H-Y-T. In discussing whether the root of the name “Moses” is the Egyptian *msi* (a common element in Eighteenth Dynasty Pharaonic names) or *msy* (meaning “to give birth”), Hoffmeier (*Israel in Egypt*, 140-42) cites scholars who concluded that the Egyptian *s* (normally represented in Hebrew by a “*samekh*”) can be transliterated into the Semitic *š* (*shin*). It may be of interest that another leonine deity, variously transliterated as *Maches* or *Mahes*, was a minor god whose cult center was situated in the Delta and was said to be the son of either Sekhmet or Bastet (Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses*, 178-79).