

It can always get worse...a saying we had in my day. Life was hard, but we assured ourselves, it could be worse, much worse. I am an elder of the tribe of Issachar in the time when Hebrews are slaves of the Egyptian Pharaoh. We have forgotten who God is. Even the Elders. Sad, really. But when a stranger appears claiming he knows who God is, we have to wrestle the question: Who gets to decide who God is? And in our dire situation, the answer is a matter of life and death.

To answer our opening question, we need to run through the backstory. Abraham is the father of the Hebrew nation through his son, Isaac...and through his son, Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel. That is why Hebrews are also called Israelites.

Israel had twelve sons. Each of those sons became the head of a family dynasty, or tribe. That is why the Israelites are called the Twelve Tribes of Israel. These tribes stayed as identifiable family units, but they also stayed identifiable as one big family unit. They remained this way until most of the tribes, known as the Northern Kingdom, were wiped out by the Assyrians many centuries after my time.

The remaining tribes were the small tribes of Benjamin and Levi, and the much larger tribe of Judah. That is why the Israelites also came to be called Jews. About fifteen million descendants of those tribes still exist to modern time, and they are still known as Jews.

You have probably been taught that the first leader of the Israelites was Moses. His leadership role was assumed by Joshua, then the judges, transitioning to the prophets through Samuel. During Samuel's time, God appointed King Saul to lead the Israelites. King Saul was followed by David, Solomon, and many others. The kingship of Israel ended when the Israelites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians in 586 BC.

Except for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple under the leadership of such men as Ezra and Nehemiah, you probably don't know much about the leadership of the Jewish nation until the time of Jesus. At that time, you probably think that Israel was ruled by the emperors of Rome, who appointed local kings, such as the Herods. Under them, the Jewish leaders were the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Not bad. In a couple of minutes, I described what most modern Christians think of when they think of the history of governance of ancient Israel, right? Moses, Joshua, King David and his family, Romans, Pharisees, Sadducees. And done. Wrong! These are the people who get all the

press, but most Christians today completely miss a critical piece of the history puzzle. That's why *you* may not even know who gets to decide who God is!

It's easy for me to see why you miss this puzzle piece. Let me lead you to the answer by using a technique used by many of your modern psychiatrists – word association.

“Elder”... what is an elder? Maybe you grew up in a family where older people were highly respected, or at least were supposed to be highly respected. Maybe your parents told you, “Respect your elders.” Parents say that sort of thing when they are telling you what to do.

If you are a Christian, you might think of Paul appointing elders in Acts, or the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy or Titus. Maybe you think of the other instances where elders are important in the early church.

I'm pretty sure that few Christians today immediately think of elders of the Jews in the Old Testament. Surprising because they are referenced much more often than New Testament Christian elders!

Let me drill down on the Israelite history. You'll love this. While the Jews were in slavery under Pharaoh, they developed a leadership structure where each tribe had leaders called elders. Those tribal elders led the Israelites in conjunction with Moses, Joshua, the judges and Samuel.

The kings led the nation of Israel in conjunction with the elders. In fact, it was the elders who confirmed David as king,¹ and the elders who caused the split in the nation into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

The elders functioned as local leaders of the Jews throughout the New Testament! In fact, Jesus and his disciples were accused of violating the tradition of the elders.² Throughout the history of the Jewish people, the elders have been critically important.

I am an elder of the tribe of Issachar in the time when Hebrews were slaves of the Egyptian Pharaoh. I live in the time when Moses is chosen by God to lead us from captivity. For you to have a good understanding of the Old Testament, I think you need to have a better understanding of my thought process, and the thought processes of the other Hebrews of my time. In order for you to do that, I need to give you a better sense of time.

About six centuries before me, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be numerous, and they would inherit the land of Canaan. Abraham knew God well.

¹ 2 Samuel 5:3,

² Matthew 15:2

About four centuries before me, Joseph was the second in command of Egypt, and moved the twelve tribes of Israel to Egypt from Canaan. Joseph knew God well.

Over the last four centuries, we Israelites moved from being in a favored position with Pharaoh to being slaves of Pharaoh. God has been silent during these long, long four centuries. We do not have any written scripture, so what we know about God has been passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation over four centuries. That is FOUR HUNDRED years! What did your ancestors of four hundred years ago believe? You don't know. Most of you don't even know who your ancestors are. Or if you do, what your great grandparents believed.

The God of Abraham is a distant memory to us. He must not love us very much, because the Egyptians are mistreating us so badly. What is very real to us, though, are the Egyptian gods. Their statues and priests surround us. They seem to be very powerful gods because the Egyptians are very prosperous. Many of us worship the Egyptian gods because we want to be prosperous, and because they seem much more real to us than the God of our far distant ancestors. We want to be free from slavery, and the Egyptian gods seem to be our best bet. We don't really care about moving to another country, we just want to quit being slaves. We just want it to quit getting worse.

One evening some of my fellow elders and I are just trying to recover from a hard day of making bricks and hauling them around. Resting and talking. Up walk these two strangers who appear to be shepherds by looks of their robes and staffs. The taller one says he is Aaron ben Amram, and the other is his brother, Moses.

At the name of Moses, we freeze. We know the story of a Hebrew named Moses from 40 years ago who lived in the Pharaoh's palace. But that Moses had to flee Egypt after killing an overseer of Hebrew slaves. He's a wanted man. Surely, he cannot be that Moses! But he most certainly is.

Now, get this. Aaron keeps on talking, but Moses doesn't say a word. Aaron tells us how Moses saw God in the burning bush. How God said he had seen the Hebrews in their distress, and he is determined to bring them back to Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. And – here is the ironic part – God is going to have Moses, the wanted guy, lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.

Aaron tells how Moses explained to God that he is a nobody, but God didn't listen, how Moses insinuated that the Hebrews themselves wouldn't recognize his authority, and that they don't even know God. How God said to tell them that I AM, the god of their ancestors, sent you. The elders will go with you to Pharaoh and he will refuse you until I punish him severely. You will actually plunder the Egyptians in their desire for you to leave.

Aaron says Moses made more excuses. To shut him down, God turned Moses' shepherd staff into a snake, struck him with leprosy, then healed him, and then even allowed him to take his brother, as his side-kick. Aaron. Moses finally ran out of excuses. So, he says, here we are.

That is the most fantastical story any of us have ever heard. After considering the story for a while, we ask Moses to perform some of those signs, and he does.³

We find ourselves in a check mate. We elders have to decide who God really is, and what we should do about it. Who are we to make such a momentous decision? We are born slaves, we have no education, we barely remember anything about that God. What are we to do?

We know the Egyptian gods and are comfortable worshiping them. We can see them in the sun and moon and Nile River. Those gods seem to be real and powerful. The pharaoh that serves them is definitely powerful, and will surely punish us severely if we rebel or even complain.

We can hardly remember this god named I AM, the god who purports to be the God of our ancestors, the one True God. This Moses guy seems to be able to do miracles, but he certainly doesn't seem as rich and powerful as Pharaoh.

It is a quandary for us. We are paralyzed with fear, we don't want things to get worse. Then...Aaron...changes everything. He says that God cares for us, God wants for our misery to end. We're in shock. Speechless. The Egyptian gods could not care less about us. In fact, it seems that they are happy for us to suffer if it makes the lives of pharaoh and his priests better.

We begin to weep, and then bow down and worship God. Aaron and Moses tell us more about the I AM God of the Hebrews. Some of our elders miraculously start remembering stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and about their God.

We fear Pharaoh, but hope God will protect us. And then it hits us. No matter what it looks like, this is not a battle of God versus Pharaoh. This is a battle between God and the gods of Egypt to determine who God is.

By daybreak, we are hesitantly ready to support Aaron and Moses.

It's a gamble. But, honestly, it can't get any worse.

³ Exodus 4:29-31