

Exodus 4:14-17; 7:1-5

“Moses Will Be Like God”

“Then the anger of the LORD burned against Moses, and He said, ‘Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. Moreover, he shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be as God to him. You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs’” (Exodus 4:14-17).

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘See, I make you *as* God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh that he let the sons of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not listen to you, then I will lay My hand on Egypt and bring out My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by great judgments. The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst’” (Exodus 7:1-5).

Most Bible readers naturally assume that when the English title “God” is applied to an entity, that such an entity would understandably be the Eternal Creator. For the most part, this is true. Yet in Biblical Hebrew, it is to be noted how the term *elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) has a selection of uses, beyond that of God proper, including “rulers, judges, either as divine representatives at sacred places or as reflecting divine majesty and power,” or “divine ones, superhuman beings including God and angels” (BDB).⁴⁶ Context, for sure, is what will determine in what way the term *elohim* is to be approached. Those who hold to a low Christology of Yeshua the Messiah being a created, supernatural agent, but ultimately not God, may make some appeal to passages where the title *elohim* is employed to designate a figure which is obviously created, and which has been chosen by God proper to perform some important task for Him. Two places in the Book of Exodus (4:16; 7:1) need not escape our notice, where the activity of Moses is described along the lines of him somehow being “*elohim*.” **What is actually being claimed?**

The first scene, Exodus 4:14-17, describes what God proper is going to do about Moses’ thinking that he is not a very eloquent or gifted speaker (Exodus 4:10-13), meaning that he will not be too qualified to take a declarative message to the Egyptians to free the Israelites. The Lord, angry at Moses, informs him that his brother Aaron will be the main speaker (Exodus 4:14) in their encounters with Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The words Aaron will speak will be directed to him from Moses, who in turn will be given the words from God proper (Exodus 4:15). In the chain of direction from God proper to Moses and then to Aaron, Exodus 4:16 details, “He shall speak for you to the people; and he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God” (RSV).

How is one to approach the assertion *v’attah tihe’yeh-lo l’elohim* (וְאַתָּה תִּהְיֶה־לוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים), “and-you you-will-be to-him as-God” (Kohlenberger)?⁴⁷ Advocates of a low Christology, seeing a figure like Moses titled with *elohim*, an obvious agent of God proper, may draw a similar conclusion for instances where Yeshua the Messiah is designated as “God” (i.e., Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1). But for Moses in Exodus 4:16, the role that he has been assigned by God proper, in his relationship to Aaron, is detailed in the clause *l’elohim* (לְאֱלֹהִים), the preposition *l’* (לְ) mainly

⁴⁶ BDB, 43.

⁴⁷ Kohlenberger, 1:154.

meaning “to, for, in regard to” (BDB),⁴⁸ “as God” (NASU, RSV/NRSV/ESV, HCSB) being the most common English rendering. However, the fact that Moses is actually described *l’elohim*, has given rise to a number of alternative translations for Exodus 4:16, some of which translate *elohim* has something other than G/god:

- “and as if you were God to him” (NIV).
- “and you shall be a god for him” (LITV).
- “you shall be for him a god” (Fox); “you will be for him like a god” (Alter).
- “and you will be as the god inspiring him” (New Jerusalem Bible).
- “and you will be his leader” (ATS); “and you shall be a leader for him” (Keter Crown Bible).
- “you will be the god he speaks for” (NEB).

In Exodus 4:16, Moses is not directly called *elohim*, but instead is designated along the lines of *l’elohim*. In their resource *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi label one of the uses of the preposition *l’* as “*Estimative*...expresses the opinion or perception held by the object of the preposition.”⁴⁹ Aaron, Moses’ brother, is to view him in terms of *l’elohim*, with Moses acting “as God” in the function of delivering God proper’s words to him. Employing the 1917 JPS version, “and thou shalt be to him in God’s stead,”⁵⁰ J.H. Hertz indicates that this means “Moses receives his inspiration direct from God.”⁵¹ The NET Bible renders *v’attah tih’e’yeh-lo l’elohim* with, “as if you were his God,” and in its translation notes specifies that the role of Moses *l’elohim* is to be approached as God proper inspiring a prophet to speak His words:

“The phrase ‘as if’ is supplied for clarity. The word ‘you’ represents the Hebrew independent pronoun, which makes the subject emphatic.

“...Moses will be like God to Aaron, giving him the words to say, inspiring him as God would inspire a prophet. The whole process had now been removed one step. Instead of God speaking to Moses and Moses telling the people, Aaron would be the speaker for a while. But God was still going to work through Moses.”⁵²

Exodus 4:16 is properly concluded to speak of Moses “playing the role of God to him [Aaron]” (NJPS).

The second scene, where Moses is described with the term *elohim*, summarizes what the Lord or God proper intended to do, as Moses and Aaron would encounter the Egyptian Pharaoh, commanding him to let Israel go (Exodus 7:1b-2), God’s hardening of the Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 7:3), Pharaoh’s rejection and the subsequent judgment upon Egypt which would follow (Exodus 7:4-5). This actually opens with the claim, as it appears in the NASU, “See, I make you *as* God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Exodus 7:1). More literally what appears is, “See, I have made thee a god to Par’o: and Aharon thy brother shall be thy prophet” (Jerusalem Bible-Koren). Moses is directly, by God proper, given the designation of *elohim*, but there is some specific context which is to be considered by the reader.

Most English translations add words to *re’eih netatikha Elohim l’Par’oh* (רָאֵה נְתַתִּיךָ אֱלֹהִים לְפָרְעֹה), “see! I-made-you God to-Pharaoh” (Kohlenberger).⁵³ While *elohim l’Par’oh* is literally “G/god to Pharaoh,” a variety of English versions are seen adding words, not always designated by *italics*, in how they have chosen to render *re’eih netatikha Elohim l’Par’oh*:

⁴⁸ BDB, 510.

⁴⁹ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 114.

⁵⁰ Also: “and thou shalt be to him instead of GOD” (Jerusalem Bible-Keter).

⁵¹ Hertz, 220.

⁵² *The NET Bible, New English Translation* (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), 126.

⁵³ Kohlenberger, 1:161; also: “See, I have made you a god to Pharaoh” (LITV).

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- “See, I make you *as* God to Pharaoh” (NASU).
- “See, I make you as God to Pharaoh” (RSV).
- “See [now], I have made you like God to Pharaoh” (NEB, NIV, NRSV/ESV, HCSB).
- “See, I will make you as a god for Pharaoh” (Fox).
- “See, I have set you as a god to Pharaoh” (Alter).

An even more less-than-literal rendering of *re'eh netatikha Elohim l'Par'oh* is seen in the Keter Crown Bible: “Look, I have made you as a master over Pharaoh.”

What is intended by *re'eh netatikha Elohim l'Par'oh*, is contingent on how one approaches the verb *natan* (נָתַן), which in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice) can mean “to **set, place, lay**” (HALOT).⁵⁴ For Exodus 7:1 to be properly appreciated, one has to consider the position of the Egyptian Pharaoh, as ruler of the Thirteenth Century B.C.E. superpower. Rendering *re'eh netatikha Elohim l'Par'oh* as “See, I have set you as a god to Pharaoh,” Alter details how “this bold comparison may have a polemic motivation: Pharaoh imagines himself a god, but I have made you a god to Pharaoh.”⁵⁵ The NET Bible has, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh,” for Exodus 7:1, and then goes on to explain the added words in its English translation:

“The word ‘like’ is added for clarity, making explicit the implied comparison in the statement ‘I have made you God to Pharaoh.’ The word אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) is used a few times in the Bible for humans (e.g., Pss 45:6; 82:1), and always clearly in the sense of a subordinate to GOD – they are his representatives on earth. The explanation here goes back to 4:16. If Moses is like God in that Aaron is his prophet, then Moses is certainly like God to Pharaoh. Only Moses, then, is able to speak to Pharaoh with such authority, giving him commands.”⁵⁶

The Egyptian Pharaoh believed himself to be a living god, and so to counter this, the designated servant of the One True God, Moses, is given the place of God in his dealings with him. There is no ambiguity in Exodus 7:1 that Moses is anything but a subordinate or authorized agent of God proper, with the power and authority he will be exercising going back to Him.⁵⁷ Durham fairly observes,

“The assertion that Moses is to be made a god (אֱלֹהִים [*elohim*]) to Pharaoh, and that Aaron will function as his prophet...is to be understood as a credit to Yahweh and not to Moses or to Aaron. What is to bring this about is described in vv 2-5: Moses is to speak what Yahweh will appear to Pharaoh as no one else ever has, ‘given,’ as he will be, as ‘a god’ to Pharaoh by Yahweh’s words, words delivered by Moses with Aaron’s help, and confirmed by Yahweh’s deeds.”⁵⁸

In his commentary on Exodus, Sarna also draws the reasonable conclusion,

“This passage is more than simply a repetition or variant form of 4:16. The earlier verse concerned the functions of Moses and Aaron in their dealings with the people of Israel; here Moses is to fill the role of God in negotiations with Pharaoh, who claimed divinity for himself. Moses’ divinely endowed power and authority will expose the hollowness of that claim.”⁵⁹

To clarify to English readers what is actually in view in Exodus 7:1, it might be better if the verb *natan* were translated as “set,” “put,” or “placed,” rather than “make.” The CJB/CJSB has a

⁵⁴ HALOT, 1:734.

⁵⁵ Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 345.

⁵⁶ *The NET Bible, New English Translation*, 126.

⁵⁷ Sol Scharfstein, *The Five Books of Moses, an Easy-to-Read Translation* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 2005), 184 has paraphrased Exodus 7:1 with, “Watch! I will make you seem like a god to Pharaoh.”

⁵⁸ Durham, 87.

⁵⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 36.

good rendering: “I have put you in the place of God to Pharaoh.” The irony seen is that Moses, a created human being, and coming into Egypt from a wilderness life of tending sheep, will have a greater legitimacy being regarded as “G/god” to some extent, than the leader of the Thirteenth Century B.C.E. Ancient Near Eastern superpower.

Moses being designated with the title *elohim* in Exodus 4:16 and Exodus 7:1, contextually requires readers to conclude that he is an authorized agent of the One True God or Elohim. Those who hold to a low Christology of Yeshua the Messiah being a supernatural, yet ultimately created being, may use this as evidence of Him possessing the title of “God,” as the Father’s agent sent into the world. Those who hold to a high Christology of Yeshua the Messiah being uncreated and being God, have tended to avoid references to created entities or individuals, which are titled as “G/god” to some degree. While Moses is called *elohim* by God proper in Exodus 4:16 and Exodus 7:1, what we do not see Moses do anywhere in the Torah or Pentateuch, is claim a self-identification in the first person “I” as the LORD or YHWH. Moses is always seen speaking in the third person for the Lord. **Yeshua the Messiah, however, is witnessed speaking in the first person as the LORD or YHWH, and His origins are decisively other-worldly** (discussed further).

Exodus 13:21; 14:19 **“God Moving as the Pillar of Cloud”**

“The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night” (Exodus 13:21).

“The angel of God, who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them” (Exodus 14:19).

Those with a cursory knowledge of the Exodus and wilderness sojourn of Ancient Israel, recognize that the people were led by a pillar of cloud during the daytime, and a pillar of fire during the night. But in the Torah narratives detailing this, who was the specific entity responsible for this? It is witnessed in some places that it was the LORD or YHWH who was responsible, and in other places His messenger or angel. Which is it? Is “the messenger/angel of the LORD” only to be regarded as a supernatural agent sent by the Lord, or might “the messenger/angel of the LORD” actually be, at least at some time, a manifestation of God proper? What is communicated to readers as it concerns the overlapping descriptions of this figure as being both the LORD or YHWH, but also being sent by Him?

Exodus 13:21 states *v’YHWH holeikh lifneihem* (וַיִּהְיֶה הַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם), “Now YHWH goes before them” (Fox). Following this in Exodus 14:19 it is narrated, *v’yisa malakh haElohim haholeik l’fnei machaneih Yisrael* (וַיִּסַּע מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים הַהֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵי מַחֲנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל), “And the messenger of God that was going before the camp of Israel...” (Alter). Later on, though, in Numbers 20:16, the Israelites are recorded as saying, “But when we cried out to the LORD, He heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out from Egypt; now behold, we are at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory.”

So, what are we to make of the figure which led the Israelites out of Egypt via a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire? Was it the LORD or YHWH manifest as an angel? Was it a messenger/angel sent by God? There is no agreement among examiners. Noting Numbers 20:16, “And we cried out to the LORD and He heard our voice and sent a messenger and brought us out