

# ISRAEL Teaching Letter

Vol. # 770322 • March 2022 • [www.bridgesforpeace.com](http://www.bridgesforpeace.com)

## The God who SPEAKS

By Rev. Peter Fast, *National Director, Bridges for Peace Canada*  
Bridges for Peace...Your Israel Connection®

**FOR MANY CHRISTIANS**, the events which culminated in the Israelite Exodus from Egypt and the thunder of Sinai may bring images to mind of Charlton Heston as Moses or inspire awe at the magnitude of the impressive display of thunder, rushing wind and fire enveloping the mountain. Or perhaps what captures our focus is how Moses's face shone, the inscribing of the commandments or God's voice quaking from the mountain (Exod. 20:18–21). The events at Sinai highlight God's holiness and power, and move us deeply.

At Sinai, we see God's character of covenantal relationship and His promises to the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ps. 105:7–11)—on full display as the tribes became a nation (Exod. 19:6; Deut. 7:6). However, something profoundly significant occurs behind the scenes of the Exodus and Sinai account that Christians in the 21st century rarely understand. This profound significance would have deeply impacted the Hebrews as they stood at the base of the mountain. They didn't just see erupting fire and wind or hear a voice. Recall that they had already experienced the outpouring of God's wrath upon Egypt in ten plagues and had miraculously passed through the Red Sea. This significance was something far deeper than simply being awestruck by supernatural wonders. What they experienced ran contrary to everything represented within the pagan world.

## THE ULTIMATE VOICE

The Hebrews did not just hear a voice from the mountain. They heard and saw **the ultimate voice!** The source of the voice was



the LORD God of their forefathers who shared no power with any other god (Exod. 20:1–6; Deut. 6:4–5). His revelation to the Hebrews delivered another earth-shattering reality. The God of Israel was a relational God, full of steadfast love and mercy (*chesed*), as described in the magnum opus of God’s name (Exod. 34:6–7). So, what exactly did it mean for the people of Israel to *actually* hear the voice of God and learn His name (YHVH, the unspeakable name of God)? Contrast this against the entire paradigm of the pagan world from which they had just emerged after living as slaves for generations.

The ancient pagan world was shrouded in darkness. It was believed that all of creation, including mankind, had been created as slaves to the deities, to exist in a perpetual state of servitude. With this belief, mankind saw deity in everything, and the magnificence of nature drew them into worshiping creation and electing gods and goddesses who supposedly held power, influence and control over the forces of nature. Dennis Prager’s commentary on Exodus states:

“It is thoroughly understandable that human beings would worship nature. In this world, nature, after all, is everything. But nature, unlike the God of *Torah* [Gen.–Deut.], is amoral, and therefore unworthy of worship. Whereas God is preoccupied with good and evil and with justice, nature has no interest in any of them.”

## PAGAN UNDERSTANDING

The pagans, in an attempt to make sense of their world and confront the unpredictable power of nature, created mythologies of the polytheism they were immersed in. These mythologies represented actual life for them, not fairy tales, and were taught and believed as answers to how the cosmos and the world operated. The deities even reflected and behaved as humanity behaved—sometimes worse. Ancient Near Eastern scholar John Walton states, “The mythology of both Mesopotamia and Egypt makes clear that the gods had origins. They exist[ed] in familial relationships, and there are generations of gods.” Walton continues:

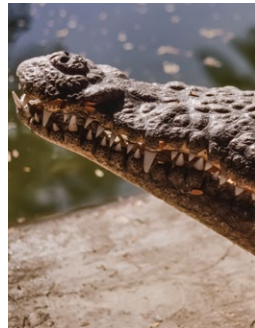
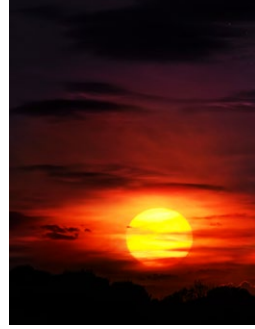
“It would be difficult to discuss with ancients the concept of divine intervention because in their worldview, deity

was too integrated into the cosmos to intervene in it. For the most part, deity is on the inside, not the outside. The world was suffused with the divine. All experience was religious experience; all law was spiritual in nature; all duties were duties to the gods; all events had deity as their cause.”

However, these deities were distant, indifferent to the needs of humanity, and did not convey their minds, wills or desires to humanity, let alone show love to humans. Instead, what was required was for humans to divine the will of the gods in order to placate them. For if the gods held absolute power over nature and human affairs, then how was one to discern the will of the gods from prosperous times of plenty juxtaposed to violent natural events such as earthquakes, flooding or famine? Thus, oracles, priests, diviners and magicians took center stage in order to discern the will of the gods so the nation could survive (Exod. 7:11; 1 Sam. 28:7–20; Dan. 2:1–3).

These “intercessors” employed incantations, laid offerings before idols, administered sacred spaces with temples, held festivals, sacrificed animals and took notice of natural signs. Priests would go into drug-induced trances to hear from the gods, believed that certain prophets could be possessed by deities, and inspected animal livers, hearts and intestines for divine signs. They would sometimes harm themselves (1 Kings 18:28) or make music and dance in an effort to gain the deities’ attention. It was believed that deities did not speak with people. The only possible way to know the mind of the gods was through supernatural signs, which could only be deciphered by a professional “intercessor.”

This left people in a state of constant underlying fear, disconnect, hopelessness and vulnerability. The gods could bless an individual one moment, and then torment him the next. Take, for example, the Neo-Assyrian prayer, “A Prayer to Every God.” Walton explains:





“The worshiper is seeking to appease a deity from anger over an offense that the worshiper presumably committed. There are only two problems: He does not know which god is angry, and he does not know of anything he has done wrong. He therefore addresses each confession he makes to ‘the god I know or do not know, the goddess I know or do not know.’”



The worshiper’s frustration, so clearly evident in the prayer, should appeal to our sympathy. “I would constantly seek (for help) but no one would help me. I cried but they did not approach me...I am distressed; I am alone; I cannot see” (cf. Acts 17:23). Walton continues:

“This is the plight of those who live in a world without revelation. In the end, for all of their conscientious ritual, they did not know what [the] deity wanted—they could only adhere to tradition and ride out the storm.”



## THE POWER IN A NAME

Names in the ancient world were associated and tied to role, function and identity. We see this throughout Scripture and certainly with the God of Israel (Exod. 34:6–7). For Christians, it’s wonderful to know that even the name Jesus (Yeshua) means “the Lord is Salvation.” Yet in the ancient pagan world, many of the names of the deities were only pseudonyms, for the gods kept their distance and refused to give their true names for fear that mankind would be able to control or manipulate them.



But again, the problem with the pagans was that their gods did not speak to them. There was no relational voice, comfort, love, hope, justice or salvation to be heard, just empty silence in a wild world as diviners channeled the gods and brought back abstract messages. The God of the Bible, however, presents the complete opposite reality. The God of Israel reveals Himself (cf. Gen. 12:1–3) and

literally gives His word through men who are led by His Spirit (2 Peter 1:19–21).

For the Hebrews, after four centuries in Egypt, immersed in a pagan world where gods controlled everything from the Nile River, the sun, moon and crops, as well as existed in everything such as frogs, cats, crocodiles, cattle, the events leading up to Sinai were titanic. Naturally, the Hebrews could recall the God of their forefathers. Even Joshua, much later at the renewal of the covenant at Shechem, reminded the Israelites of this fact prior to entering the Promised Land (Joshua 24).

## GOD'S FAITHFULNESS REVEALED

But while they had served the Egyptians as slaves, had God still cared for His people? Would He rescue them? Would He speak to them? Or had He become like the gods of Egypt, silent and indifferent to their pain and suffering? The pagans believed gods were ranked strongest to weakest. Pharaoh, after all, was a “son of Ra,” so maybe the God of the Hebrews was not as powerful as He had come across to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? All of this would be answered at Sinai.

At Sinai God thundered and revealed His faithfulness. He had saved them from Egypt, and through Moses's leadership, He gathered them at the base of the mountain. God called to Moses from the mountain, *“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself”* (Exod. 19:3b–4). God's love is abounding. He shows His faithfulness to the nation, His covenant people, whom He describes as a



a “*special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine*” (Exod. 19:5; cf. 1 Chron. 17:21).

The entire Hebrew nation witnessed the power and majesty of the God they served. They saw His mighty acts and heard His voice. They learned His Name (Exod. 3:14) and were given His commandments (Exod. 20) in which to know the will of their be oved and that they served a Holy God. He reflects justice and love. He is absolute holiness and perfection. He is Father! He shares no power with other “deities,” as revealed clearly in the first commandment, “*You shall have no other gods before Me*” (Exod. 20:3).

## GOD’S POWER, HOLINESS AND LOVE

The Hebrews were reminded that the LORD is holy (*kadosh*), and the people must treat His holiness seriously and be clean before Him (Lev. 11:44–45). God even instructed Moses to set boundaries around the mountain while His presence came down, lest the people “*break through to gaze at the LORD, and many of them perish*” (Exod. 19:21). When God spoke, it completely eclipsed anything they had ever experienced in pagan Egypt. The Hebrews were overwhelmed and terrified at the display as they cried out for Moses to intercede (Exod. 20:18–21).

At Sinai, God upheld the promise He gave to Abraham and the covenant He cut (see Genesis 15). He forbade a graven image (Exod. 20:4–5). He spoke to the entire nation of Israel through Moses, and they beheld His presence and power. Then God literally led them to the Promised Land by cloud and fire. The echo of the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) and prophets right through to the Writings of the Apostles (NT) is that the God of Israel will defeat evil, restore the world, redeem Israel and the nations, be worshiped by the nations and eradicate all ungodly worship of other deities. However, at Sinai, amidst His faithful covenant-keeping nature, God revealed His unchanging, everlasting, steadfast love for His people Israel. “*And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth’*” (Exod. 34:6).

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Scripture is taken from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

### TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

## Bridges for Peace—Offices

**Australia:** Tel: 07-5479-4229, [bfp.au@bridgesforpeace.com](mailto:bfp.au@bridgesforpeace.com)

**Canada:** Tel: 204-489-3697, Toll free: 855-489-3697, [info@bfpcan.org](mailto:info@bfpcan.org)

**Japan:** Tel: (81) 3-5969-9656, [bfp@bfpj.org](mailto:bfp@bfpj.org)

**New Zealand:** Tel: (64) 7-855-5262, [emather.nz@bridgesforpeace.com](mailto:emather.nz@bridgesforpeace.com)

**South Africa:** Tel: 021-975-1941, [info@bridgesforpeace.co.za](mailto:info@bridgesforpeace.co.za)

**South Korea:** Tel: 070-8772-2014, [bfp@bfpkorea.com](mailto:bfp@bfpkorea.com)

**Spanish:** Tel: (52) 646-238-7206, [intl.spanish@bridgesforpeace.com](mailto:intl.spanish@bridgesforpeace.com)

**Russia:** Tel: (7) 903-309-1849, [info.ru@bridgesforpeace.com](mailto:info.ru@bridgesforpeace.com)

**United Kingdom:** Tel: 165-673-9494, [ukoffice@bridgesforpeace.com](mailto:ukoffice@bridgesforpeace.com)

**United States:** Tel: 800-566-1998, [postmaster@bfpusa.org](mailto:postmaster@bfpusa.org)

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### International Headquarters

PO Box 1093, Jerusalem, Israel

Tel: (972) 2-624-5004

[intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com](mailto:intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com)

[www.bridgesforpeace.com](http://www.bridgesforpeace.com)

