

The native and the foreign



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In the ancient world, communication was minimal, resulting in contact between nations being few and far between. Because of this, each nation developed its own view of primacy, immediately shunning others and boosting themselves. The Book of Exodus and The Histories of Herodotus are two of the earliest accounts of this world, recounting stories from Ancient Greece and Ancient Egypt. In these texts, the foreign and the native are described as the latter having a superiority complex, being physically violent to the former, but are also, in both cases, self-mocking; however, in The Histories of Herodotus, there is some form of respect, compassion, and curiosity of the foreign in the native eye. Thus, the relationship between the two is power driven, pure rivalry, yet, beneficial and sympathetic.

The ancient world bred hostility. Because any other nation could either attack or become part of a vast empire, it was common to see a divide between different people. In Exodus, this divide comes between the Israelites, the natives, and the Egyptians, whom are depicted as the foreigners. When the Pharaoh refuses to release the people because “ he hardened his heart and did not listen to them, just as the Lord had predicted” (Exodus 8: 15), it lowers the esteem of Egyptians as a whole, implying that are ignorant and stubborn in comparison to the Israelites especially when considering the ten plagues. This results in an ambitious relationship to appear better than the other, and these implications are also similar to the ones in describing the Egyptians in Herodotus. When, albeit, a Persian king stabs (what the Egyptians claim to be) a god, this “ god” is injured, and he exclaims, ““ Worthy indeed of Egyptians is a god such as this!” (Herodotus 3. 27). Here, the natives profess their greater worth than

that of the foreigners, claiming that their gods are far more superior, and that it should only be fitting that a “ weak” god should be fitting of a “ weak” people. This necessity to portray the other as lower and weaker stems, again, from the competitive nature of the relationship.

From this, blatant insults also arise among these texts. For example, in Herodotus, “[the Egyptians], pervert the truth of history, claiming to be kindred with the house of Cyrus” (3. 3), or in other words, they lie in order to appear far more important, and in this case, powerful. Another insult raises questions of foreigners’ honor and methods of approach to war, claiming it to be “ intolerable that a woman should make an expedition against Athens” (8. 93). These insults show not only their desire to appear better, but also their drive to defeat the other. Not only are there insults of character, in Exodus, the superiority complex of the “ Chosen People,” the Israelites, is evident in the insult of simply not caring about the Egyptians in any form. They have no remorse after passover when “ there was no house in which there was not someone dead” (12: 30), as there is no definitive reaction written to state otherwise. These feelings of believing to be being better than their enemies and having to express so are similar among the two texts, revealing a petty relationship between the natives and foreigners.

While verbal insults and slights act to demonstrate a relationship of disgust for the foreigners and desire to be superior, the relationship between the two is also one of rivalry. Violence between the two groups is comparable between both Exodus and Herodotus, illustrating the most physical example. Herodotus writes that “ nothing more happened than the carrying away of women on both sides” (Herodotus 1. 3), who were further raped and

assaulted as a form of revenge for the attack on either side's women, as cause for the hatred between the Greeks and the Persians. This extreme retaliation showcases their rivalry and hatred of each other, and moreover, a disregard, considering they can so easily and heartlessly attack their women, who are traditionally symbols of vulnerability. In Exodus, the Israelites act akin. Even though they are freed from maltreatment in Egypt, they continue on to become the ones mistreating others. For example, they are eventually successful in overtaking Canaan, attacking and plundering a city after having only just escaped such behavior. They also, with blessing from God, “plundered Egypt” (Exodus 12: 30), illustrating their desire to conquer their enemies. To have come from a nation that treated the Israelites poorly to become those treating others poorly is evident, as in Herodotus, of savagery and the desire to defeat the other.

Although a majority of the relationship lies on hatred, in both texts, there are also mentions of negativity and dislike of the natives themselves. In a way, the relationship is beneficial because there are small parts in which the natives become self aware of some of their flaws. In Herodotus, there is an open confession that “Hellenes make wars... very much without wise consideration” (7. 9). This confession, perhaps, lessens the blind disgust and maltreatment of foreigners by indicating that the natives partially recognize their treatment may be unwarranted. However, in Exodus, it is God himself that recognizes a flaw in the native and supposedly superior people. When the Israelites create a Golden Calf that they then begin to worship, God tells Moses, “leave me alone so that my anger can burn against them and I can destroy them, and I will make you from a great nation” (Exodus 32: 10).

Because God is the one to pronounce that his own followers are at fault and should be punished for attempting to attach physicality to him, it reveals a truth and value about the Israelites: that they are not as perfect as they tend to claim and are just as flawed as their enemies. The inclusion of negative thoughts about the natives from themselves is analogous between the two works, and thus, demonstrates that the relationship is not purely hatred of the other party without reflection on themselves.

The only contrast between the depiction of the relationship between native and foreign in Herodotus and Exodus is that in Herodotus, there are occasional expressions of sympathy for the foreign. In just the introduction before the actual accounts of events, Herodotus writes that the book will consist of “ works great and marvellous, which have been produced by some Hellenes and some by Barbarians” (1). In this statement, there is recognition of the good in foreigners. It can be inferred that this statement also implies at least some ounce of respect, despite other previous arguments against any, which differs from Exodus’s portrayal of a harsher relationship between native and foreign.

In addition to this inference of respect, there is also a certain amount of curiosity present as well. Herodotus not only explores the events of other cultures than his own Greek culture, he does so in a way that is not as judging or discriminatory as it is in interest. When describing the customs and traditions of the Egyptians, he reveals that he has the opinion that they do everything backwards, such as the “ women attend the markets and trade, while the men sit at home at the loom (5. 35). Although he comments that what they do is, in a way, reversed than what he is used to, he takes an

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anthropological approach: he merely observes. Such observation is demonstrative of his desire for knowledge, and thus, the native's, about the foreigner in a way that is not always sly and malicious, as it seems to be in Exodus.

This curiosity also seems to harbor the slightest bit of compassion in the relationship between native and foreign, as well. While Herodotus claims to nearly be recording history and making sure that certain stories are not lost, he includes certain dialogue that is not entirely vital to the story he is telling, but this dialogue reveals sympathy for the people he is supposed to dislike. For example, when Xerxes, the current Persian king during the time of the Persian Wars, declares that he is to march on Hellenes for the revenge of his father, a man approaches him with a plea. He asks, ““ Do thou, therefore, O King, have compassion upon me, who have come to so great an age, and release from serving in the expedition of one of my sons” (7. 38). This inclusion of an older gentleman pleading with the king to exempt one of his sons from the expedition, so that he does not to die alone, is a true example that there is at least a small sliver of sympathy for the foreign. This dialogue also shows that the native, on occasion, does not lump together the people as a whole rather than individuals, considering that such a story is pitiful and empathy provoking which makes it difficult to disregard.

In summation, in both Exodus and Herodotus, the relationship between native and foreign is not strictly based on pure rivalry, but complex in that it is ambitious, yet also self-deprecating and thereby beneficial. In the case of Herodotus, it is sympathetic, in that it is curious, compassionate, and the slightest bit respectful of the unknown that is the foreigners. Because

communication was limited in these ancient worlds, it was easy to despise the unknown out of fear of it. While overtly, there is a hatred of foreigners in the native eye, subconsciously, the awareness of another nation of people pushes for reflection on themselves. Thus, while the threat of another nation lingers in the background and causes their relationship to be driven by lust of power and hatred of those attempting to undermine those attempts, it is also beneficial in that it causes self-reflection and curiosity in the other party.