

Confronting Pseudo-Archaeological Memes Pt 6: Is saying “Amen” Pagan?



If you know me, then you know I do not tread lightly in the area of linguistics. My reason is simple – I am not fluent in any language except English and serious linguistic studies require more than a basic knowledge of a language. I like to joke that I can read Hebrew – but I usually have no idea what I am reading. What I can do is sound out words, and recognize a growing number of them, which does not make me even a novice much less an

expert. When I do need to cover this area, I have experts whom I consult – people who can speak the language and who are also knowledgeable about the “rules” and intricacies of the language historically. I refuse to armchair quarterback such an important area of study or to parade my ignorance before you. Beyond my growing ability to use Logos, which does not make me a language scholar, I readily admit that this is most certainly not my area of expertise. Frankly, I just can’t know everything.

Fortunately, answering this question doesn’t require any knowledge whatsoever of ancient Egyptian which is a good thing because no one, and I mean no one who is actually still alive, knows what the language sounded like. Most of the names of Egyptian gods and goddesses in our repertoire are actually Greek. That’s right, the Greeks gave many Egyptian gods and goddesses Greek names – and those are the names, like Osiris, that we are often most familiar with. At the time that the Greeks were writing the stories of the ancient Egyptian

mythologies (enter Herodotus, who was too quick to tell us what monuments said when almost no one in the world could still read hieroglyphics and has now been proven wrong), they also loved to put their own spin on everything – thus the Grecian naming of deities and cities (in fact we still largely use Greek city names in Egypt to this day). Words that we have popularly believed to be Egyptian are actually Grecian in origin. Pharaoh Thutmose's real name was actually dhwtj-nht – say that three times fast! Oh wait, no vowels, we can't even say it once!

When Egyptologists unlocked hieroglyphics they found that, like Hebrew and all other languages of the day, there were no vowels. Ancient Egyptian evolved into Demotic (a Greek influenced form of Egyptian) around 600 BC (only priests in Herodotus' day could read hieroglyphics) and into Coptic around 200 AD. By the seventeenth century, even Coptic was a dead language – being the African equivalent of Latin and only used for liturgies. Coptic was not the third phase of the language, however, but the sixth. During the times of the Kings of Israel, Egypt had entered into the fourth evolution of its language. Nowadays, Egyptians speak a form of Arabic, as they have for centuries.

Here's the deal – **no vowels** – every linguist on the planet and every Egyptologist will tell you that the reconstruction of ancient Egyptian is based on knowledge of consonants only and the vowels are pure guesses. They made certain “executive decisions” about what vowels would go where for sanity sake – there was no choice. For the god known variously as Amen and Amun and Amana, we only have the hieroglyphs for the “m” and “n” sound – which explains the various guesses. If we were to say, therefore, that saying “Amen” is pagan we would also have to throw out words like manna – however, we don't even have to go that far because “Amen” in Hebrew is aleph mem nun – not simply mem nun. Three consonants, not two as in the hieroglyphic name of the god.



Time and time again we see people making claims about ancient languages and pagan words, and much of the confusion can be eliminated with the realization that ancient languages are pretty much all reconstructions and any archaeological linguist or philologist will tell you that if we went back in a time machine to any ancient culture and tried to speak “their” own language to them they wouldn’t understand what we are saying – nor would we understand them. These languages are educated reconstructions meant not to show us how the languages sounded, but which were instead the tools needed to translate documents. To translate a document, one only needs to know what a series of letters meant in context, not how it sounded. Discoveries of artifacts like the [Rosetta stone](#) and the [Behistun Inscription](#) have unlocked multiple ancient [lost languages](#), allowing us a window into the Ancient Near East, but no one in the field of study (that I have ever come across) thinks that they can actually speak the true original language. No, my favorite TV show Stargate doesn’t count, it’s fiction and Daniel Jackson wouldn’t really have been able to speak with the people of Abydos.

So the next time anyone tells you that a Biblical Hebrew word is pagan, know that there is no way on earth to prove it and so there is no reason on earth to worry about it. We don’t even know without a doubt how to pronounce ancient Hebrew, let alone other ancient languages. Let’s worry about what we can in fact know – context, character, and spiritual application – chasing pronunciations in dead languages is not something that will yield any fruit in our lives save that of confusion. Barring the digging up of a tape recorder of Pharaoh’s conversations with Moses, there is not much chance that we will ever know for sure how ancient Egyptian sounded – and

truly, it isn't very important. It takes more than putting syllables together to call on the name of any god – it takes faith in that god.

Russell D. Rothe, William K. Miller, George Robert Rapp, Pharaonic Inscriptions from the Southern Eastern Desert of Egypt (consulted for the name of Thutmose in transliterated hieroglyph – available online)

Muriel Mirak Weissbach, Unlocking the Civilization of Ancient Egypt: How Champollion Deciphered the Rosetta Stone, Fidellio, Vol 8, No 3, Fall 1999 (great article for a homeschool resource – linked in body of post)