



The Book of Exodus

Exodus 7-11: The Plagues

Between the call of Moses in Exodus 3 and 6 and the Israelite departure from Egypt in Exodus 12 stands the narrative of the ten plagues. These are the miraculous punishments that afflict Egypt with increasing severity, until, finally, Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites go. It is by the mechanism of the plagues that the Israelites gain their freedom. Yet this relatively simple story is not nearly as straightforward as it first appears, or as it is usually told.

Two Sources

The plagues narrative, like so many others in Exodus, is a composite story, the combination of the two documents J and P. Each tells of these miraculous events, but, as always, tells it differently: different plagues, different rationales, and different chronology. There are some plagues that are held in common, and some that are distinctive to each; it is by the combination of the two that we end up with the final count of ten. The J narrative contains blood, frogs, insects, pestilence, hail, and locusts; the P story has the staff turning into a serpent (actually probably a crocodile), blood, frogs, lice, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness.

Though external confirmation of scholarly source division is often impossible, the plagues are one case where we probably do have convincing evidence that we have unraveled the two strands in the text correctly. Two of the psalms, 78 and 105, recount in poetic form much of the history described in prose in the Pentateuch. When they come to the plagues, the two look very different. Psalm 105 tells the story very much as it appears in the canonical text. Psalm 78; however, does not seem to recognize any of the plagues that are exclusively from P: no lice, no boils, no darkness. Whether Psalm 78 knew J, or vice versa, or whether both emerged from the same school of thought, we can probably not say. But the psalm does provide good evidence for the existence of a J-like tradition and is a strong support for the division between J and P in the plagues particularly.

As for the differences between J and P, we can see the basic distinctions between the two if we look at the plague of blood, in Exod 7:14–24. Here are the J and P stories side by side:

J

¹⁴The Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. ¹⁵Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake. ¹⁶And say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness.” But you have paid no heed until now. ¹⁷Thus says the Lord, “By this you shall know that I am the Lord.” See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood; ¹⁸and the fish in the Nile will die. The Nile will stink so that the Egyptians will find it impossible to drink the water of the Nile.’” ²⁰He lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood ²¹and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. ²³Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this. ²⁴And all the Egyptians had to dig round about the Nile for drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the Nile.

P

¹⁹And the Lord said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt—its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water—that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone.” ²⁰Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. ²¹And there was blood throughout the land of Egypt. ²²But when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as the Lord had spoken.

The two sources both recount a plague of blood, but they do so in totally distinctive ways. We can note some of the smaller differences first. Which water turns to blood? In J, it is only the water of the Nile; in P, it is all of the water, even the water in cups and barrels. This difference explains the last verse, 7:24, in which the Egyptians have to dig holes away from the Nile in order to find water. In its canonical form, this sentence makes little sense, as even distant from the Nile there will be no water, only blood. But in the context of the J story, it is perfectly sensible. Who performs the miracle? In J, it is Moses alone, with his rod; in P, it is Aaron, acting on Moses’s instructions (given to him by God, of course). This solves one of the more difficult parts of the canonical story: the question of why Moses should be told to bring his rod along when he goes to Pharaoh, if in fact Aaron then goes ahead and uses his own staff. How is the miracle brought about? By striking the water, or by holding a staff over the water? In J, it is by striking; in P, it is by holding. In the canonical text, it is apparently by both: Moses says that he will strike the water with his rod (7:17), but in P Aaron is instructed to “hold your arm over the waters of Egypt” (7:19). Are there magicians? In J, the answer is no; in P, it is yes—at least until the magicians are unable to conjure the same sorts of tricks themselves.

There are more major issues, however. In the J narrative, there is a confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. Moses goes to Pharaoh and speaks to him, in an attempt to convince the king to let the Israelites go. Pharaoh, however, is stubborn—he is unmoved by the plague. In the P narrative, there is no dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh. Throughout the P story, neither Moses nor Aaron nor Pharaoh ever speaks. Only God speaks, and only to instruct Moses and Aaron. In other words, there is no attempt to convince Pharaoh with words in the P story, nor is Pharaoh given any opportunity to express his opinion on the matter.

The Purpose of the Plagues

This observation goes to the very heart of the matter: what is the purpose of the plagues? In J, they are truly plagues: divine miracles that punish the Egyptians, with the intent of convincing Pharaoh to change his mind and let the Israelites go. Thus between each plague there is a passage of time, in which Pharaoh can feel the effects of the preceding plague and decide whether he can stand another. Moses goes to Pharaoh and tells him about each plague beforehand, to give the king a chance to avert it. Moses often speaks to Pharaoh afterward; all of the scenes where Pharaoh relents somewhat before becoming angry and stubborn again are from J. In J, Pharaoh really does let the people go, eventually. This is the point of the plagues, as God says to Moses: “You shall say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, manifested himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God.’ Yet I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might. So I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall let you go” (Exod 3:18–20).

In P, however, none of this is the case. Moses does not announce the plagues; Pharaoh cannot avert them. He is given no opportunity to decide whether he can stand another. In fact, in P, virtually all of the plagues happen in a single day, in a single session of Moses and Aaron standing before Pharaoh. There is no significant passage of time: it is one divine punch after another. (The exception is the plague of darkness, which lasts three days—because darkness for a moment is hardly rare or a hardship, nor is it a sure sign of divine power.) And this is because the object of the plagues is not to convince Pharaoh to let the people go. It is to punish him, and his people, for their treatment of the Israelites. It is to demonstrate God’s supreme power, nothing else. And thus it is in P that Pharaoh is not stubborn of his own free will; rather, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart precisely so that God can pile up the plagues—which, in P, are not called plagues at all, but, more accurately, signs and wonders. P’s statement introducing the plagues lays this out clearly: “The Lord replied to Moses, “See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet. You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply my signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay my hand upon Egypt and deliver my ranks, my people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst” (7:1–5).

The P narrative in particular raises a thorny moral dilemma for the reader of the plagues narrative: can we celebrate Pharaoh's downfall, the destruction of his land and people, if he did not have free will to prevent or allow it? In J, we are allowed to enjoy ourselves: Pharaoh makes his own mistakes, and we can agree that he deserves everything he gets. There is even an element of comedy: the negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh are all about how the Israelites have to go sacrifice to Yahweh in the wilderness, after which they promise to return. We know, however, that this is a ruse: the Israelites are not planning to return, nor are they planning to go sacrifice. Moses is simply trying to get Pharaoh to let the people go, young and old, with all of their possessions: "we won't know what we are supposed to worship Yahweh with until we get there," says Moses (Exod 10:26). The reader can laugh at how completely Moses tricks Pharaoh, much as we enjoy Jacob's trickery in Genesis. But in P—and therefore in the canonical (presentation of the composite from the three sources) story too, which contains the repeated refrain of "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart"—there is nothing to celebrate. That the Israelites will eventually leave is known from the beginning; the plagues, in fact, have nothing at all to do with it. They are a display of divine power, pure punishment. They border on petty.

Natural Phenomena

The plagues are one of the aspects of the Exodus story that has been most subject to attempts at identifying some historical kernel, or, more accurately, some naturalistic explanation. It has been noted that some of the plagues have an authentically Egyptian flavor: swarms of locusts, for example, are a documented ancient Egyptian nuisance. It is suggested that the waters turning to blood could be explained by a rare red algae bloom that gives the Nile the occasional appearance of redness; darkness could be a solar eclipse, etc. Recently, some have claimed that almost the entire sequence of plagues could be explained as a result of climate change.

These sorts of naturalistic claims may help explain the traditional origins of the particular plagues recounted—it is possible that a momentary redness in the Nile could stand behind the idea that the river might turn to blood—but it hardly does justice to the biblical story itself. The story of the plagues is one of divine miracles, not of natural phenomena. The meaning of the story is entirely dependent on these signs and wonders and plagues being sent by God, either to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go or to punish him for having enslaved them. The reader, like Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and even like the Israelites themselves, is supposed to understand from these wondrous happenings that God is at work on behalf of Israel. "You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might" (Exod 6:1). It is the greater might of God that is the constant throughout the plagues cycle. To remove that aspect in favor of a naturalistic explanation is to miss the point of the story entirely.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org