

Reformation Fellowship Notes • September 11, 2016

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Handout #12

Exodus: The Plagues as a Whole

I. Introduction

- A. We have talked about the first nine plagues.
- B. We will talk about the tenth plague.
 - 1. The tenth plague is special.
 - 2. We will talk about it at some length.
- C. I want to talk today about the plagues as a whole.
 - 1. Why did God choose to deal with Pharaoh this way?
 - 2. Why these particular plagues instead of others?

II. God Could Have Acted Differently.

- A. God could have just killed Pharaoh and the Egyptians.
- B. God could have appeared before the people of Egypt in all his glory and demanded that they let the Israelites go.
- C. Having chosen to use plagues, he could have used other plagues.
 - 1. Alternative evils
 - a) Why not the bubonic plague?
 - b) Why not a tsunami?
 - c) Why not an earthquake?
 - d) Why not fire?
 - 2. Why these particular plagues?
 - a) Why blood?
 - b) Why frogs?
 - c) Why gnats?
- D. I don't know the answers to these questions.
 - 1. Many different approaches have been proposed.
 - a) I will list some.
 - b) I will talk about how I am thinking about this.

III. Various Answers to "Why Blood?"

- A. Proposal: The plagues targeted the realms of popular Egyptian gods.
 - 1. Every plague can best be accounted for as an attack on a particular god.
 - a) First plague
 - (1) Khnum was guardian of the Nile.
 - (2) Hapi was the "spirit of the Nile."

- b) Second plague
 - (1) Heqt was the god manifested in the frog.
 - (a) She was goddess of birth.
 - c) Third plague
 - (1) Geb was god of earth.
 - (a) He gave of the bounty of the earth
 - d) Ninth plague
 - (1) Amon-Re was the sun god.
 - (a) He was the main Egyptian god.
 - e) If we knew more, we could identify a different god for each plague.
2. My critique:
- a) It is possible that all the plagues can be accounted for in this way.
 - (1) But I suspect not (gnats? flies? etc.).
 - (2) There does not seem to be a clear association of each plague with a particular Egyptian god.
 - b) Whether they can or not—this is not the focus.
 - (1) The gods are shown to be impotent, but the emphasis is on Pharaoh.

“The texts reviewed here, spanning from the Middle through New Kingdoms, illustrate that the king was closely associated with the sun, moon, the inundation and the fertility of the land. Furthermore, the connection between Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt is firmly established. What the plagues of Exodus show is the inability of the obstinate king to maintain Maat. Rather, it is Yahweh and his agents, Moses, and Aaron, who overcome in the cosmic struggle, demonstrating who really controls the forces of nature.” (Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, p. 153)

- (2) Egyptian culture saw Pharaoh as son of god, and, in fact, a god.
 - (a) He was mediator between gods and Egyptians.
 - (b) His job was to hold back the chaos.
- (3) Chaos was most threatening when it affected most basic needs.
 - (a) Food
 - (b) Weather
 - (c) Long-term survival
- (4) The plagues were directed at showing the powerlessness of the most powerful man in the world.

Digression:

I am struck by how little interest the Bible shows toward evil spiritual forces (Satan, demons, etc.).

The Bible is much more interested in unmasking human institutions that lay claim to our allegiance in the place of God.

The position of Pharaoh was a **human** creation.

- (a) So, I do think that a condemnation of the gods of Egypt is part of what the plague narrative is doing, but this is not the best way of thinking about why God sent the plagues.

- B. Proposal: The blood foreshadowed the death of Jesus.
1. I could not find a clear presentation of this view.
 2. This is the best reconstruction I can offer:
 - a) God was signaling that rebellion can only be dealt with by the shedding of blood.
 - (1) Jesus accomplished this in his death on the cross.
 - b) At the Passover, a lamb's blood had to be sprinkled on the door posts in order to escape the angel of death.
 - (1) This suggests a substitutionary death.
 - (2) So the account as a whole points to Jesus' death on the cross.
 - c) Jesus signaled that he was the one to perform this miracle when he turned water to wine.
 3. My critique:
 - a) I would not go so far as to say that the first plague foreshadowed the death of Jesus.
 - b) But turning the Nile to blood contributes to a cultural significance of "blood" that can be tapped into in gaining an appreciation of the death of Jesus.
- C. Proposal: The plagues were a condemnation of Egyptian society.
1. One form of this construction:
 - a) The Nile was Egypt's "life."
 - (1) It was the heart of their economy.
 - b) It was the means by which they discretely killed the Israelite babies.
 - (1) The Hebrew children were sacrificed to the economic system.
 - (2) And all of Egyptian society was complicit in this.
 - c) The Israelites needed more than mere freedom; they needed psychological healing from their experience as slaves.
 - d) God turned the Nile to blood as condemnation of the entire Egyptian way of life.
 - (1) Condemning Egyptian society in this way brought psychological healing to Israelites.
 2. My critique:
 - a) This appears to be a Marxist influenced interpretation.
 - (1) I don't mean this to automatically invalidate this interpretation, but I suspect that there is more eisegesis than exegesis going on here.
 - b) I don't think the plague narrative is intended to be primarily a socio-economic critique of Egypt.
 - c) I think the fact that the Egyptians were told to kill the Hebrew boys by throwing them in the Nile is significant.
 - (1) The question is how they are related.
 - (2) It could be that the sanitized murder of the babies is being shown for what it really was—the murder of innocent children.
 - d) As I said earlier, I am struck by the fact that the attack is leveled against Pharaoh, as a human institution, rather than any spiritual powers.

- D. Proposal: The plagues were a grand combat.
1. YHWH is engaged in combat with Pharaoh and his gods.
 2. The whole plague narrative interacts with Egyptian religious practice and mythology.
 - a) Magicians were known as great speakers.
 - (1) Moses was not a great speaker.
 - b) When Moses was told to pour out water, he would have been like a funerary priest (“water-pourer”).
 3. Some of the plagues appear to be speaking to Pharaoh in the symbolism of Egyptian religious culture.
 - a) Turning the Nile to blood:
 - (1) The Egyptian word *dšr* can mean either “red” or “blood.”
 - (2) It is synonymous with evil.
 - (3) It is strongly associated with Oxyrhynchus fish and death.
 - (a) “All the fish in the Nile died” (Exodus 7:21).
 - (4) Red is also connected with the execration ritual.
 - (a) This plague signaled to them the imminent destruction of Egypt.

“A close look at the account recording Moses before the magicians (Exod. 7:8-12) and the Song at the Reed Sea (15:1-18) confirms the remark by Currid that the Exodus account ‘is remarkably brimming with elements of Egyptian religious and cultural background. Only an author who was well-versed in Egyptian tradition could have composed such a poignant piece’. In addition, these same texts portray the Pharaoh and his magicians as ‘subjected opponents’, and in a subtle and ironic reversal of roles, as unwilling execration victims. The latter is accomplished by a polemical casting of the demise of the Egyptians in the form of a victory song utilizing imagery from Egyptian execration practices.” (Scott B. Noegel, “Moses and Magic: Notes on the Book of Exodus,” *JANES* 24 (1996), 45-59.)

4. My critique:
 - a) I think this is the closest to capturing what was intended.
 - b) The Bible basically accepts the ancient mythological picture of God versus evil and chaos.
 - (1) But the mythology misidentifies the hero of this story.
 - (2) YHWH is the one true God.
 - (3) The Bible uses and builds on the cultural vocabulary of this mythology.
 - c) In the plagues, God is saying, “I can accept that you, as Egyptians, are constantly threatened by chaos and evil and that only mighty spiritual power can keep you safe. I, YHWH, am the one and only mighty spiritual power to which nothing else can compare. And the greatest form of chaos that you face is moral chaos. And I, through my people, Israel, will make known how I have conquered chaos and, in particular, spiritual chaos.”

IV. What Do the Plagues Contribute to the Story of Exodus?

- A. Plagues as revelation of character of YHWH
 - 1. Organization of the presentation of the plagues
 - a) Three sets of three
 - (1) First of set—formal confrontation
 - (2) Second of set—go
 - (3) Third of set—unannounced
 - b) Each set is progressively more threatening.
 - c) Pressure builds; then a break comes
 - 2. What does this say about YHWH?
 - (1) He is not quick to destroy his enemies.
 - (2) Lots of warning
 - (3) Very patient
 - (4) Powerful, incomparable
 - (5) Can reach into Egypt
 - (6) Spares his own people
- B. Plagues as condemnation of Pharaoh
 - 1. Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world.
 - 2. All of Egyptian society and culture perpetuated the myth that he was the ultimate source of all their prosperity and security.
 - 3. This was all a vicious lie.
 - a) His power was a superficial reality.
 - (1) Our experience tells us that matter is solid.
 - (a) The greatest power is a big hammer.
 - (2) Chemistry tells us that it is mostly space.
 - (a) The greatest power is an atomic bomb.
 - b) In the face of YHWH, Pharaoh was completely powerless.
- C. Plagues as preparation for Exodus
 - 1. Encouragement to Israelites
 - a) They are not certain their God is able to do this.
 - b) They needed encouragement.
 - c) They don't really want to leave Egypt.
 - 2. Predispose Egyptians to help Israelites
 - a) The Egyptians come to respect Moses and his God.
 - b) The Egyptians want the Israelites to leave.
 - c) The Egyptians give the Israelites wealth when they leave.
 - 3. Preparation for the conquest
 - a) Word of what God did in Egypt precedes the Israelites into Canaan and helps them in the conquest (Joshua 2:9; 9:24).

- D. Plagues as a key moment in human history and salvific history
 - 1. The plagues and the Exodus are very important.
 - a) We will get into this more when we talk about Passover.

V. Broader Significance of the Plagues

- A. The plagues in Exodus seem to have some relationship to the plagues in the Apocalypse.
 - 1. Some similarities:
 - a) Water to blood (Revelation 8:8; 11:6; 16:3-4)
 - b) Hail and lightning (Revelation 8:5; 8:7; 16:21)
 - (1) Locusts (Revelation 9:3-11)
 - (2) Darkness (Revelation 8:12; 16:10)
 - 2. Some possible similarities:
 - (1) Frogs (Revelation 16:13)
 - (2) Boils (Revelation 16:2, 11)
 - (3) Death at hands of destroying angel (Revelation 9:13-19)
 - 3. Some dissimilarities
 - a) Not all the plagues have twins in Revelation.
 - (1) And many more in Revelation
 - b) Different order
 - 4. Conclusions
 - a) God is making some kind of association.
 - (1) Plagues on Egypt were a foreshadowing of the plagues at the end of history.
 - (a) Show of God's power
 - (b) Demonstration of the impotence of man's substitutes for God
 - (c) They are gradual.
 - (d) God protects his people from the brunt of his judgment (Revelation 7:3).
- B. The plagues in Exodus were a small scale picture of the much bigger and more severe plagues of the end.