

SIGNS AND WONDERS

The Plagues: Exodus 7-11

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Of all the strange stories in the Bible, the account of the plagues is among the most foreign and bizarre. What sort of God would engage in such a catastrophic campaign of shock and awe? And why would he do it?

Within the narrative of Exodus, God makes his purpose abundantly clear: he wants the world to know him. For example:

- When Moses returns as the deliverer of his kinsmen, Pharaoh says (5:2), “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.”
- When Moses sought further instructions, the LORD said (6:7) “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you (Hebrews) shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.”
- In the opening account of the plagues, the Lord says (7:5), “The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.”
- This same refrain—that you shall know the LORD—is repeated 8 more times throughout the plagues and the escape from Egypt.

Whether or not one believes that the plagues are a good way for God to reveal himself to the world, the story of Exodus clearly indicates that God’s rationale for the plagues is self-disclosure.

In fact, the more you read the Bible, the more you find this to be God’s purpose everywhere. He intends for “the earth to be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). Don’t you find this surprising? For centuries, the western world has believed the opposite. During the Age of Enlightenment, as our scientific understanding of the natural world exploded, Deism emerged as a prominent religion for the intellectual elite and a precursor to modern secularism. Deism posited that while there must have been a Creator who made the universe, after creation he wound it up like a clock, set it running naturally according to science, and he hasn’t been heard from since. Deists disregarded the Bible precisely because of its continual insistence that God is actively involved in the universe and in the affairs of mankind. They held that everything happens because of natural science, rather than the intervention of supernatural forces. And with regard to the plagues, Deists discounted them as an unfortunate series of natural disasters rather than true “acts of God.”

As a formal religion, Deism isn't as popular as it used to be. However, its underlying assumptions have only grown in prominence, such that skepticism about the knowability of God is the default position in contemporary culture. Most people we meet today are agnostic (from Greek a-gnosis, *without knowledge* of God), whether they admit it or not. And most would agree that the plagues, if they're historical at all, have a natural explanation rather than a supernatural one.

So which is it? Are modern skeptics right in saying that God is unknowable, and the plagues are merely a stylized record of natural disasters in Egyptian history? Or are Christians correct when they say that the plagues were truly acts of God?

I'd like to explore this question further, by taking a closer look at the story and considering what it says about the God of the Bible. If he exists, and if he chose to reveal himself through the plagues, what does it teach us about him?

THE PLAGUES REVEAL THE SUPREMACY OF THE LORD

I often make pastoral visits to pray with people who are in the hospital. Here in Washington, we are blessed to have some of the world's finest hospitals, and therefore a very healthy city. Nevertheless, whenever you pass inside the doors of a modern hospital, there's no question regarding the prevailing worldview. It's not that Christianity is forbidden; it's just seemingly irrelevant, because within the modern hospital, belief is swallowed up by naturalism. There's a scientific explanation for everything there. Through the supremacy of human knowledge and medical technology, there's very little that we can't fix ourselves.

While you probably don't work in a hospital setting, you probably do work or go to school in a place where Christianity isn't forbidden, but it does seem irrelevant. Each morning, whether you walk in the doors of a hospital, or a school, or a government agency, or a for-profit business, it's very likely that the God of the Bible feels very small in comparison with the modern pantheon—the gods of knowledge and pleasure and power.

Long ago on the other side of the world, the Hebrew people felt the same way. When Moses told them that the Lord would free them from slavery, they believed and worshiped. But when Pharaoh demanded bricks without straw, they prayed to Pharaoh as their god, because the LORD felt very small in comparison.

Consequently, when the LORD comes to rescue his people, he comes to deliver them from Pharaoh and the other gods of Egypt, by doing battle against them.¹ God wants the world to know him, and the plagues are intended to reveal his supremacy over other gods.

There were more than a thousand Egyptian gods; some say that there were almost 9,000. It's easy to read the plagues as God doing battle with the Egyptian pantheon. For example, in the first plague, the LORD turned the Nile into blood. Pharaoh's patron god was Osiris, the god of

¹ On at least two occasions (Ex 12:12, Num 33:4) the plagues are explicitly described as God executing judgment on the gods of Egypt.

the underworld and the dead, and it was believed that Osiris' bloodstream was the Nile. Thus, when the LORD turned the Nile into blood, he demonstrated his supremacy over Osiris and the Nile. However, Pharaoh's magicians were able to produce the same sign. So the LORD brought a second plague—an invasion of frogs. In ancient Egypt, Heket was the goddess of childbirth, and she was represented as a frog. Consequently, the second plague demonstrated God's supremacy over Heket and childbirth. However, Pharaoh's magicians were also able to produce the same sign. So on it continued with a third plague (gnats). From this plague onward to the tenth, Pharaoh's magicians weren't able to mimic what God did through Moses. Again and again, God demonstrated his supremacy over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt.

But if there were thousands of Egyptian gods, and if God was doing battle with the gods of Egypt, why then were there only ten plagues? Why ten in particular? Ancient Jewish interpretation situates this 'tale of ten' between two others: Creation² and the Ten Commandments. According to this view, the plagues were God's acts of de-creation, before he recreated Israel at Mt. Sinai with the Decalogue ("ten words," i.e. the Ten Commandments). This makes good sense if we read the plagues as God reversing what he did in Creation. E.g. in the 2nd plague, frogs invaded because God removed the division between land and sea. E.g. In the 9th plague, darkness invaded because God removed the barrier between light and darkness.

Thus, when God gathers his people at Mt. Sinai to re-create them as his own people, his very first word is one of supremacy over other gods:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Exodus 20:2-3.

The LORD defeated the gods of Egypt. Therefore, his people shouldn't turn back to them, or to any others, because he is supreme among the powers. The plagues prove it.

The story of the Bible is an epic struggle for control of all the world. God is determined to save humanity *from* death and destruction, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world, so that the whole earth

THE EXODUS PLAGUES

CYCLE	PLAGUE	WARNING
FIRST CYCLE	1  BLOOD (7:14-24) The Nile, along with all of the water in Egypt, turns into blood. But Pharaoh does not let the Israelites go.	Yes, in the morning
	2  FROGS (7:25 - 8:15) Frogs cover the land of Egypt. Pharaoh promises to let the Israelites go, but changes his mind.	Yes
	3  GNATS (8:16-19) The dust turns to gnats, which cover the people and animals of Egypt. But Pharaoh does not let the Israelites go.	No
SECOND CYCLE	4  FLIES (8:20-32) Flies fill the houses and land of Egypt. Pharaoh promises to let the Israelites go, but changes his mind.	Yes, in the morning
	5  LIVESTOCK (9:1-7) All of the livestock of the Egyptians die. But Pharaoh does not let the Israelites go.	Yes
	6  BOILS (9:8-12) Festering boils break out on the Egyptians and their animals. But Pharaoh does not let the Israelites go.	No
THIRD CYCLE	7  HAIL (9:13-35) Hail strikes down everything in the fields - humans, animals and trees. Pharaoh asks for forgiveness and promises to let the Israelites go, but changes his mind.	Yes, in the morning
	8  LOCUSTS (10:1-20) Locusts devour every tree and plant in the land of Egypt. Pharaoh asks for forgiveness, but does not let the Israelites go.	Yes
	9  DARKNESS (10:21-29) Darkness covers the land of Egypt for three days. Pharaoh promises to let the Israelites go, but changes his mind.	No
CLIMAX	10  FIRSTBORN (11:1-10; 12:29-32) Every firstborn son and firstborn of the cattle in Egypt dies. Pharaoh finally lets the Israelites leave Egypt, only to change his mind and pursue them to the Red Sea.	Yes

Adapted from Mark Barry, 2007

² Traditional interpretations of the Creation account note that God spoke ten times over a period of six days: Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29.

may be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Salvation begins with deliverance from false gods, whose power is no match for the Lord's.

How then should we apply the supremacy of God in our daily work and school, where Christianity is considered an irrelevant distraction? There's actually a cosmic battle taking place in the hum-drum of our daily lives. It's a constant struggle for our allegiance, between the God of the Bible and the gods of knowledge and pleasure and power.

Whenever I make pastoral visits at the hospital, I feel this battle acutely. Twenty years ago I used to wear a white lab coat in the hospital; now I wear a clergy shirt, representing a God who has declared his supremacy over all the other gods. Though I wouldn't wish the circumstances on anyone, there's no greater privilege for me as a pastor than to lead a Christian worship service in the hospital. It's a way of confessing and declaring God's supremacy over everything that happens there. Together we give thanks for medical knowledge and technology, but we also declare that they're nothing in comparison with God's power. We confess that God is active in the world, that he is the unseen reality in the hospital, and that he hears the prayers of his people. We call out to the Lord of all Creation for healing, whether through the means of modern medicine or however he sees fit.

May I suggest that you can do the same thing every day at work, or at school, or wherever you feel the tension most acutely? Begin the work day by declaring God's supremacy in that place and in the work you do. Just as the plagues demonstrated God's supremacy over particular Egyptian gods, don't be afraid to say, "Lord, you are more powerful than _____ (technology, idea, government, etc.)." Then ask God to show you how to serve him there, such that you have no other gods before him.

THE PLAGUES REVEAL THE MERCY OF THE LORD

The mercy of the Lord is an important theme in Exodus. Towards the end of the book, after the tragedy of the golden calf, Moses cried out to God to have mercy on the Israelites, rather than abandon or destroy them. Not only did God agree to Moses' request, but he also met Moses back at Mt. Sinai and proclaimed:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty..." (Ex 34:6)

What we learn about God by the end of Exodus is that he strongly prefers to be merciful, and when asked, he will make a way to forgive and restore even the worst offenders.

Because of his mercy, God strikes Pharaoh with 10 plagues rather than only one. The first plague is scary—the Nile turns to blood—but it's not overwhelming. The fish die, but the people can still dig drinking water from the ground. It's a nuisance, but not a catastrophe. Consequently, Pharaoh isn't impressed. In Exodus 7:23, he simply turns around and goes back into his house. Pharaoh wasn't fazed; his own magicians could do the same trick.

Because of his mercy, God sends a second plague, a little worse than the first, just to show Pharaoh that he means business. When Pharaoh refuses to let the people go, God sends a third plague, and a fourth, and so on, all the way to the tenth and final plague. And what do these ten plagues show us about God? He's not a hothead, exploding with destructive wrath. Rather, he's a model of patience and mercy.

Just in case we miss God's patience and mercy in the events of the narrative, there's plenty of dialogue providing a clear window into God's intentions. Moses returns to Pharaoh again and again, not only to warn him of greater consequences, but also to explain why God sends the plagues. Moses' dialogue with Pharaoh highlights two very important elements of God's mercy:

1. God continues to offer Pharaoh second chances while fully aware that Pharaoh will take advantage of him. E.g. in the 4th plague, Pharaoh falsely offers to release the Hebrews in exchange for the end of the plague. Moses agrees, and then says (8:29): "Only let not Pharaoh cheat again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord." God knows that Pharaoh will cheat, and yet he's willing to give him another chance, and another, and another.
2. God allows Moses to intercede for Pharaoh, and the LORD hears and answers Moses' prayers. In the 2nd, 4th, 7th, and 8th plagues, Pharaoh asks Moses to pray to the LORD for relief, and Moses does so again and again. The third cycle is the most poignant, because it's in these plagues that Pharaoh repeatedly admits his guilt when he calls for prayer. During the 7th plague, Pharaoh says (9:27), "This time I have sinned. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong." He asks Moses to pray for relief and promises to let them go. But then after Moses prays for him, (9:34) "when Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart." Then during the 8th plague, Pharaoh called (10:16) for Moses and said, "I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the Lord your God only to remove this death from me." Moses prayed for him yet again, after which time Pharaoh wouldn't let them go.

Isn't God's mercy amazing? Who else would have such patience with such a wicked scoundrel? It's important that we see this before we move on to God's justice, because a careful reading of this story reveals God's preference for mercy. Just as he leaves room in later Bible stories for the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar, or Cyrus the Great, or Pilate and Festus and Caesar, God gives Pharaoh an out again and again. That's because God is not only the savior of slaves, but also of slave-masters who turn to him.³

³ Whenever we pray for the persecuted, we also can do what Moses did here, and what Jesus would do later, in praying for persecutors. Here's the prayer we used when Canon Andrew White was with us: "Merciful Father, (in addition to praying for the persecuted) we also bring before you those who through ignorance, blindness, or hardness of heart have set themselves against your church, and yet nevertheless remain sinners in need of the Savior. Soften their hearts, O Lord, so that they, like the Apostle Paul, might see that it is Jesus whom they are persecuting, and might give their lives to Him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

THE JUSTICE OF THE LORD

Yet with every plague, we move a little closer to God's justice. Yes, God *is* abounding in mercy, and because of this, he will ultimately act to defend his people against Pharaoh's tyranny. God in his mercy won't allow Pharaoh to abuse the Israelites forever. We see God's justice in many different ways in the story, so I'll just highlight a couple of prominent ones.

One is the restitution of Israel's wealth. Just as Laban tried to cheat Jacob out of 14 years of service,⁴ Pharaoh wanted to rob the Israelites of their wages. But God won't allow it. There's a wonderful progression through the ten plagues in which God bargains with Pharaoh, and wins back everything that Pharaoh had taken from the Israelites. First, God refuses to simply allow the men to go without the women and children. Then he refuses to allow the people to go without their livestock. Finally, in the 10th plague, the Israelites asked their neighbors for jewelry and clothing, and (11:3) "the LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians." They plundered the Egyptians, not as a way of sticking it to them, but as a means of godly reparations of what they had lost as slaves.

Another example of God's justice is in the redemption of the firstborn. Moses narrowly escaped Pharaoh's infanticide in Exodus 1. Then in Exodus 4, God instructed Moses to summarize the plagues before Pharaoh in this way (4:22):

"Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me.' If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son." (4:22-23)

The tenth and final plague, the one that finally sparks the exodus itself, is an execution of God's justice. It's *Lex Talionis*, the law of eye for eye, tooth for tooth. God in his justice is reclaiming Israel in exchange for the firstborn of Pharaoh.

Not only does God seek justice for Israel, but also for the land of Egypt. Remember that God's ultimate goal is that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the seas. That's why God in his mercy will not allow Pharaoh to continue to put himself forward, unchallenged, as God over Egypt. God is cleansing the land of Pharaoh, so that they might know the Lord instead.

I could cite many other examples of God's justice in the plagues. Suffice it to say that when all is said and done, justice is served, the Israelites are vindicated, and the land has been at least partially cleansed of Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt.

But how shall we apply this aspect of the story to our own lives? We have to be careful. Well-intentioned believers have often gotten this terribly wrong, as when they have declared a particular hurricane or a particular disease epidemic to be God's judgment on so-and-so for such-and-such a sin. In so doing, they presume to know the mind of God in the same way that

⁴ Genesis 30-31

God revealed it repeatedly and clearly to Moses. God also gave Moses special signs that he could perform, to demonstrate his unique calling as God's messenger. And God sent Moses to rescue the Hebrew people, through whom he had promised to bless the world. Contemporary religious leaders do not share these unique circumstances and calling with Moses.

In my opinion, our application of this passage should take us in a more humble direction: God is merciful, but we can be hard-hearted. And the more hard-hearted we become, the less we listen, just like Pharaoh.

Through the course of the ten plagues, Pharaoh hardened his own heart at the beginning, but in the final plagues the narrative says that God did the hardening. The way I read the story, Pharaoh retains responsibility for his thoughts and actions all the way to the end. One of the reasons I see it this way is because that's how Moses sees it too. Even though God repeatedly warned Moses beforehand regarding Pharaoh's hard-heartedness, Moses never thought Pharaoh was an automaton or a puppet. So in Exodus 11:8, in the account of the tenth plague, Moses gave one final warning to Pharaoh, and then he left "in hot anger." Would Moses have been angry if he had thought Pharaoh to be God's robot? I doubt it.

God is merciful, but we can be hard-hearted, just like Pharaoh. And the more hard-hearted we become, the less we listen. God's mercy lasts for a long time, but it's not infinite. Pharaoh resisted him until it was too late. Don't resist the Lord, because it will only lead to more difficulty and pain. Soften your heart, and turn to him.

CONCLUSION: THAT YOU MAY KNOW THE LORD

Ten times through the narrative of the plagues God explains his actions as being so "that you may know the LORD." What then do we know about the Lord after reading through the plagues? We've seen the supremacy, mercy, and justice of the Lord.

The Bible teaches that God revealed himself most clearly to the world through Jesus Christ, his Son. If this is true, then we ought to see these same characteristics of God reflected in the person of Jesus. We do!

- The Supremacy of God: Through Jesus, "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Colossians 1:16-17.
- The Mercy of God: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." Ephesians 2:4-5.
- The Justice of God: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Revelation 21:4.

The modern world tells us in countless ways that God, if he exists, is unknowable. Yet Jesus came into the world to reveal God to us. And he pours out his Spirit upon all those who believe in him, so that we might know and experience God more and more, and then be sent out as his ambassadors for the sake of the world. Don't harden your heart to him. Rather, know him in his supremacy, mercy and justice. Know him in Jesus. Know and be known, love and be loved by him. He will never leave you or forsake you.