



PLAGUED BY GOD: A THEOLOGY OF PLAGUES Part I

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The cover of the current *Newsweek* features authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, with the title, "The New Prophets of Revelation — Why Their Biblical 'Left Behind' Novels Have Sold 62 Million Copies and Counting." Just above their photograph the byline appears, "From 9/11 to Iraq: The truth about torture." Readers can turn from the pop prophetic preachers and the apocalyptic images of Revelation to the dark side of the American liberation of Iraq. I wonder what, if any, connection the editors intended to convey? But, more importantly, how do we as Christians understand the plagues of Revelation? Will we have to endure a steady stream of terrifying plagues unleashed on mankind? Or will there be a secret rapture where Christians will escape tribulation? What should we do while we are waiting? What role will America play in the end? What stance should Christians take toward modern-day "Israel?" What about the Palestinians and surrounding Arab nations? Who speaks for Arab Christians? These are some of the questions that are capturing the imagination of evangelicals today.

My major concern with these stories is not their theology, but their misplaced focus. Revelation was not written to produce an end-time frenzy, but to encourage Christians in the first century to remain faithful to their testimony to Christ in the face of an idolatrous, evil world. Many of the churches in Revelation had succumbed to compromise and idolatry. Others were suffering terribly for their faithful testimony. The imagery of the plagues in Revelation was deliberately shaped after the book of Exodus to give the Christians a framework for how the Creator God was combating the idolatry of Rome and how he would deal with future tyrants of the earth throughout the church age.

One of the ways in which God shapes the future is what biblical scholars call typology, which is making use of earlier individuals or events to foreshadow future characters or events. Typology assumes that there is consistency in the character of God, and therefore there is a degree of continuity in salvation history. It is not a perfect projection into the future, but it does give a broad brushstroke and lays foundational patterns for what is to come. Like the anchor bolts set in the foundations of a home, types securely "anchor" the future into the bedrock of past history. What God did through the plagues of Egypt to give birth to his people Israel became a "type" for the ministry of Jesus as the new Moses, and provide a framework for what God is doing today, calling out "a people for his name" from among all nations (Acts 15:14). God is currently advancing his kingdom by challenging and combating the idols of the nations, of our own culture, and within the fabric of our own lives. As the idols crumble, the stage is set for rebirth. My hope is that when we have completed our studies, you will have eyes to see how God is at work in every sphere

in which you live. And once you see where God is at work, you will know how to boldly enter in and be part of it, to his supreme glory.

Rather than studying the plagues verse by verse, I will take an overview, examining different themes each week. This morning we will consider three questions. We touched on these last week, but today we will see more amplification and application.

1. To whom were the plagues directed?
2. What was the nature of the plagues? In other words, how did they get their point across?
3. What should be the Christian response to the plagues?

I. The Object of the Plagues: Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt

Last week, we saw that the plagues were devastating blows by God, directed at Pharaoh, particularly the idolatry that lay behind his tyrannical regime (Exod 12:12). Scholars have identified a myriad of gods and goddesses which formed the fabric of religion in Egypt. The first plague, turning the Nile into blood, strikes right at the heart of the Egyptian gods. The sacred force behind the Nile was *Hapi*, who was praised with hymns after every flooding season brought new life to Egypt. In the second plague, Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt and frogs came up out of the Nile and covered all the land of Egypt. The Egyptians believed that frogs were sacred. This was because *Heka*, the frog-goddess, played an important role in the development of human beings, particularly the fetus. Frogs were considered so important to the development of the embryo and the process of childbirth that killing a frog was an act punishable by death. But now frogs were everywhere, so that "the mystical power...of *Heka* was...reduced to nothing more than a greasy pavement crushed to death beneath the feet of the sorrowful Egyptians."¹

It may be too much of a stretch to try and identify every god lurking behind each plague, but what is clear is the role that Pharaoh played in the Egyptian religion. Pharaoh bore the title "Son of Re," the sun god, and was responsible for sustaining the cosmic order in Egypt. If Pharaoh failed in his duties, the land would be affected and suffer severe consequences. Throughout Egyptian art and literature, Pharaoh is described as maintaining order in creation through a very powerful "arm." God challenges that powerful arm with his own "strong hand" and "outstretched arm" (Exod 15:6, 12, 16; Deut 9:29). In the ensuing struggle, the Creator proves that he alone controls the cosmos, not Pharaoh.

Israel was instructed right at the outset that these

plagues were an attack on the idolatry that attempted to rob the glory of the Creator; they were not nationalistic in nature. God further instructed Israel that she would not be immune to them if she became subject to similar idolatry in the future (Deut 28:59; 29:22). Because the plagues were not nationalistic in nature, we must never use a nationalistic lens in our current understanding of God's rule on earth. Today there is an intense struggle going on among the nations, but underneath there is a greater battle going on as the kingdom of God does battle with the rulers and principalities of this world. God's supreme battle is not with nations, but with the idolatrous world systems and the demons that lie behind them.

Sometimes these forces do become incarnate in a world tyrant, an anti-Christ figure (1 John 2:18), who breaks all boundaries of moral decency. But even then we must be cautious over where we draw the battle lines. I cannot align myself with Christian leaders who identify America with God's kingdom in the current war on terrorism. As the Creator, God is roused to deliver devastating blows against every nation's idolatry – and I know of no nation that does not have a good dose of Babylon in its veins. Whatever view we hold on current-day Israel, or America for that matter, we must never define the kingdom of God along nationalistic lines. That is not only shortsighted; it is blasphemous. America has played a vital role for democracy, freedom and human rights for many nations. It's not wrong to be proud of our national heritage or the sacrifices of earlier generations and the freedoms we enjoy. We are a nation of rare privileges that were won at a great price. On the other hand, we must also be cognizant of the fact that we have exported some of the most flagrant forms of idolatry known to man in terms of greed, pornography, and exploitation. And there are any number of metaphorical descriptions of Babylon in Revelation that could well apply to America. Recently, an Iranian student in my class at Western Seminary told the class that he suffered less persecution as a Christian growing up in a Muslim country than he did as an Iranian living in America.

Does Exodus shed any light on how we should interpret national disasters or international crises like 9/11? I do not think we are ever in a position to pass judgment on the divine significance of such events, especially when there are thousands of innocent victims. We will never have the clarity of the Old Testament prophets to say "Thus says the Lord" concerning present events, as they did of the past. We must be very careful not to take "good theology" and apply it to a wrong situation, acting like Job's counselors and creating immeasurable pain for the victims of a tragedy. But it is always appropriate in the face of national disasters to humble ourselves before a holy God and examine the idolatrous fabric of our lives. For, as Janzen suggests,

Has there ever been a time when humanity—led by Western scientific-technological society—has made as comprehensive claims to controlling its own destiny and that of the world as does humanity today? ... We think of our massive machinery, our earth-shaping operations that alter huge tracts of land through plowing, mining, deforestation, power dams, redirecting of waterways, containing the sea, etc. We think even more of the power of explosives, from the hunter's gun that has established human mastery over the animal world, to the atom and hydrogen bombs that threaten total anni-

hilation of life. Is there any limit to human power and its sovereign exercise? Then a tornado cuts its devastating swath, a flood bursts the bounds of rivers and seas, or a 'pestilence' like AIDS or cancer ravages the population. Suddenly human power is reduced to feeble efforts in the face of a release of power vastly superior to anything we can produce or control. Suddenly we are small again.²

Perhaps we could also apply the paradigm to ourselves as individuals. We may not fully understand the cause of the tragedies that befall us, but of this we can be sure: no matter what the cause, suffering always diminishes the grip of idolatry and heightens our awareness of the glory of our Creator.

This is our first "anchor bolt." From the plagues of Exodus we learn that the Creator God will endure the tyranny of idolatry only so long. And when he is roused to respond he will go through our homes, our neighborhoods, our cities and nations delivering fatal blows to idolatry wherever he sees it. None of us is immune. And when these blows occur, that sets the stage for new life.

Secondly, what was the nature of the plagues? In other words, how were they designed to get their point across?

II. The Nature of the Plagues

As we observed last week, the nine plagues in Egypt were ecological catastrophes that foreshadowed ominous historical disasters. The ecological disaster was designed to provoke awe, and through reflection would serve as a warning that a far worse historical disaster was imminent. Plagues then were not final judgments, but gracious warnings of a loving God warning Pharaoh, his court and the Egyptian people of ultimate disaster looming ahead.

Some studies have shown that the plagues show surprising similarities with the natural phenomena in that region:

All the plagues (except the hail) form a sequence of severe natural events which exhibit a cause-and-effect relationship in the very order of their happening. The plagues begin with an abnormally high inundation of the Nile. These extremely high waters would have washed down large quantities of bright red earth of the Ethiopian plateau. This soil plus reddish-colored microorganisms called flagellates, turned the Nile blood red and foul, killing the fish (first plague). The decomposing fish caused the frogs to desert the riverbanks (second plague) and infected them with a disease organism *Bacillus anthracis*, which in turn caused the frogs' sudden death. The third and fourth plagues are mosquitoes and the *Stomoxys calcitrans* fly, both of which breed freely in the conditions created by the stagnant waters of the retreating Nile flood. The cattle disease (fifth plague) was anthrax, caused by the dead frogs. The boils on men and cattle (sixth plague) would be skin anthrax, principally transmitted by the bite of the fly of the fourth plague. Hail and thunderstorms (seventh plague) would destroy flax and barley but leave the wheat and spelt for the locust (eighth plague), whose immense numbers (10:6) would be favored by the same Abyssinian rains that had caused the initial flood. Finally, the thick darkness (ninth plague; v. 21) aptly describes an unusually strong *hamsin*, made far worse by the thick layer of fine

red dust from the mud deposit of the inundation. In this interpretation, the miraculous elements consist both in the unusual severity of the events and in their timing. God uses the created order for his own ends.³

I would add that there is also the miraculous protection afforded the Israelites in the midst of the later plagues. How closely the plagues corresponded to natural phenomena is still open to debate. But what is clear is that God was using nature as a mirror of morality. When God created the heavens and the earth, his first act was to create boundaries through spatial and temporal separations. Light was separated from darkness (day 1); the waters above were separated from the seas below (day 2); and finally, the land was separated from the sea (day 3). Through these inviolable separations, order was created out of chaos. Fixed boundaries within the created order are what make life possible. But now in Egypt, the creation was leaving its boundaries, wreaking havoc all over the country. Pharaoh's universe was running amuck and returning to chaos. The second plague paints a horrific picture.

"The Nile will swarm with frogs, which will come up and go into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed, and into the houses of your servants and on your people, and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls. So the frogs will come up on you and your people and all your servants." (Exod 8:3-4 NASB)

Fretheim elaborates on the imagery: "The image of 8:3-4 is extraordinary: frogs in your house, in your bed, in your oven, in your pots and pans, and jumping all over you! Everywhere, in everything! The image is both humorous and grotesque; it conjures up one messy situation."⁴ When the divine act occurs (8:6), the narrator uses the singular "frog" to describe the situation; "it is as if one humongous frog, one big monster, has Egypt in its grip."⁵ Pharaoh has no escape. He can't run and hide in his private chamber, his bedroom, or even his bed. He is a hunted person, having no rest day or night. Nothing can stop the frogs. So Pharaoh calls his magicians to solve the problem, but all they can do is duplicate the miracle. Now Pharaoh has twice the number of frogs!

The situation becomes so intolerable that Pharaoh finally weakens and appeals to Moses to entreat God on his behalf. If the God of Moses will remove the plague of frogs, then Pharaoh promises to let the Israelites go. To give more glory to God, Moses tells Pharaoh that the honor is his to tell him when. God will be obliged to act according to his timetable. Pharaoh urges, "Tomorrow!" God answered Moses' prayer and frogs are once again confined to the Nile:

"The LORD did according to the word of Moses, and the frogs died out of the houses, the courts, and the fields. So they piled them in heaps, and the land became foul." (Exod 8:13-14)

Imagine the scene: the entire land of Egypt covered with dead frogs. What a headache for the garbage collectors and landfill operators who had to pile up the dead carcasses! The whole land stank and became foul. The image evokes a painful memory of the Holocaust. As the allies advanced in Europe it came obvious that Hitler's tyranny was doomed. Even in the face of defeat, Hitler redeployed more resources away from the front to the concentration

camp in order to exterminate more Jews. But the Nazis couldn't exterminate them quickly enough. Bodies were piled everywhere. Then the orders came down to destroy the evidence before the allies arrived. The bodies were stacked in heaps and burned. The Nazis were able to burn their victims, but they could not remove the putrid stench of unspeakable death that covered the land.

In Egypt, the significance of dead frogs piled in heaps should not be missed. The creation was posting a warning to Pharaoh that if he did not soon repent, all the Egyptians would soon be piled dead on the seashore (14:30). As Fretheim aptly suggests, "Pharaoh's own nose should tell him that something is amiss here. Perhaps the phrase 'covered the land of Egypt' (v. 6) also portends an ominous future, looking to the waters of the seas which 'covered' the Egyptians (14:28; 15:5, 10; cf. Ezek 30:18)."⁶

Perhaps the imagery, as grotesque as it is, should serve as a warning to us as well. How do we know when God is finally provoked to take action against our own idolatry? How do we know when God's forbearance has run its course? Let us learn a lesson from Pharaoh's frogs: it is when God takes his hands off and removes all boundaries of restraint. The idol that we once seemed able to manage and secretly indulge finally comes out of the closet and invades every sphere of our existence. Indulgence is no longer confined to the evening, when we are offstage and alone; it begins to invade the daylight hours of our thinking. The idol wakes us up in the morning, goes to work with us, appears at lunch, eats away at us in the afternoon, then follows us home and keeps us awake at night. It is as if our immune system has finally failed and all the normal barriers are gone. And even when we shake it off to escape from its grip, every place we flee to is stained with the stench of its memory. What we sought to indulge as our secret pleasure now becomes our public disgrace. The slimy frogs are in our lap and leaping everywhere. We are consumed by the idol we served and are remade in its image.

Is this not Paul's message in Romans, where he describes the wrath of God in the threefold repetition of the phrase, "God gave them over"? (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 1:21-25)

The lack of sexual boundaries in our present culture ought to warn us that idols have long been present in our nation, and that God is now allowing us to be remade in their image. This then is our second anchor bolt. The sign that God is taking action against idolatry in our lives is when all boundaries of restraint are removed and we are consumed by the idol we once thought we could control.

What then should be the Christian response to present-

day “plagues”? How do we respond to the AIDS epidemic in Africa, to the cry for same-sex marriage in San Francisco, to the obsessive-compulsive behavior of our roommate, to an alcoholic spouse, to a teenage son addicted to pornography, or to a neighbor diagnosed with cancer?

III. Our Response to Plagues

A. If you are Pharaoh

If you are Pharaoh, remember that the plagues were not final signs of judgment but warnings of impending doom if he did not repent. In one sense we should thank God that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32) and would rather deconstruct our present world of idolatry than have us face eternity without him. So if the frogs are invading your home and are caught in your sheets, do what Pharaoh did: confess your sin publicly and have someone pray for you. Through the prayer of righteous individuals you will harness the powers of the Creator God who will be eager to restore your soul with proper boundaries, just as he did in the original creation.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. (Jas 5:16)

B. If you are Moses

If you are Moses, you should learn to be a “frog watcher.” Whenever we see “frogs” on the loose in the world around us, this is a sign that the Creator God is alive and well and asserting his rule on earth. And when it occurs, we must resist the temptation to self-righteous glee (i.e. “they got what they deserved”) and escaping the world’s sorrow with non-involvement. This is the critical time for Christian intervention. This is when the souls of people are tender, and God is setting the stage for new life. May God make us like Moses, who was deeply moved by the suffering of the Egyptian people and intensely “cried out” (*tza’aq* speaks of an intense cry for relief from injustice or suffering) to God to heal the nation (8:12).

Jesus gave the same word to the apostles. Before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, he explained that there would be a terrible tribulation on earth, with wars, rumors of wars, great earthquakes and famine. Yet the disciples would not be taken out of these plagues, but were asked by Christ to bear witness in the midst of them. For though this would be a time of unprecedented suffering in world history, yet it was also a time of open doors for worldwide evangelism: “And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. And when they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:10-11). The disciples gave heed to Jesus’ words and evangelized the whole of the Roman Empire before the end of the century.

The apostle Peter expanded Jesus’ exhortation to the early church when it was going through severe persecution:

The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. (1 Pet 4:7-10)

The Christian response to living in the last days should be to pray soberly, to love deeply, to open our homes enthusiastically, and to use our spiritual gifts diligently. When the world suffers cataclysmic trauma, this is our supreme opportunity to give witness to Christ and offer the healing love of the gospel.

In the summer of 1519, the great Swiss Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, learned that the plague had broken out in Zurich. He immediately left his travels and returned home. Like a faithful shepherd, he cared for the sick until he fell sick himself and almost died. He recovered, but the sickness took a severe toll on him for over a year. Upon recovering, he wrote the following lines:

*My God! My Lord!
Healed by Thy hand
Upon the earth
Once more I stand.
Let sin no more
Rule over me;
My mouth shall sing
Alone of Thee.⁷*

1. Thomas Horn and Donald Jones, *The Gods Who Walk Among Us* (Las Vegas: Huntington House, 1998). The quote is from <http://home.att.net/~freefrm1/publish/>.

2. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (Scottsdale: Herald, 2000), 145.

3. William LaSor, David Hubbard, Frederic Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 69-70. The study LaSor refers to is G. Hort, “The Plagues of Egypt,” *ZAW* 69 (1957): 84-103; 70 (1958): 48-59. See also Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 70-73.

4. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 116.

5. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 2:47.

6. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 117-118.

7. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 8:43-46.