

A METHOD IN THE MADNESS

A THEOLOGY OF PLAGUES Part 2



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 Exodus 7-11
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 Brian Morgan
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We continue our studies in Exodus concerning a Theology of the Plagues. First, we have seen that the plagues were divine blows directed at Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. They were not nationalistic in origin. They were powerful attacks against the idolatry that lay behind the nation. Secondly, the plagues were not final judgments. They were ecological disasters that served as warnings ("signs") of imminent historical disaster. Thirdly, the plagues became types of how God would shape the future history of Israel and the world. What God did in Egypt to give birth to his people Israel he was now doing among all the nations to call out a people for his name. This morning I would like to address the question of what was the ultimate purpose behind the plagues, to see if we can discern a method in the madness.

In the midst of a national or personal tragedy, one of the most difficult things to overcome is the lost sense of order and purpose. Panic often seizes us. As it seems we are drowning in a sea of chaos, we lose all our normal bearings. With no anchor points and no sense of how to proceed, psychological paralysis sets in and we lose our ability to function. The simplest tasks can seem insurmountable. But even in the darkest times of life, if we can identify some sense of structure, than we can discern a purpose within the turmoil. When we are able to identify a purpose, then we have the possibility for hope.

As a pastor, I am often called to minister in tragic situations. The most difficult times are the death of a loved one, especially an unexpected death. Over the years I have learned that my calling is not to take charge, but to see such a time as holy ground where God has already been at work. My task is to enter in with eyes to see and ears to hear where the divine voice is calling; and when I see it, to identify it by simply calling attention to the God who is bringing life out of death. My task this morning is to help you identify the divine structures in your own life and the lives of those around you when you are in the midst of chaos.

First, we will look at the literary structure of the plagues; secondly, the purpose behind their long duration; and finally, how the plague of locusts shaped the future history of Israel with hope.

I. The Literary Structure of the Plagues

In Genesis chapter 1 there is a systematic structure in the creation of the cosmos. In verse 2 we read, "The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters" (Gen 1:2 NASB). What follows are two three-day cycles, followed by a seventh, climactic day. In the first three days, God established order out of chaos by creating huge temporal and spatial divisions in his universe. In the second cycle (days 4-6), he created an abundance of life where there once was emptiness and void. Each day moves from evening (darkness and chaos) to morning (light and life). The seventh day, the Sabbath, signifies the completion and perfection of the created order, designed as a gift to mankind to appreciate and celebrate the finished work of God.

In the plagues of Exodus there is a similar structure to make the point that the Creator God is meticulously deconstructing Pharaoh's cosmos one idol at a time. Nahum Sarna gives an overall chart of the plagues so we can observe the cyclical patterns taking place in what I would label "the deconstruction of Egypt."¹ (Please refer to chart on page 4 of this message.)

Several details in the list of plagues make it clear that this is a well-designed plan by the Creator God, not a haphazard quirk of fate. The well-defined order tells us that there is a divine purpose involved in all this, and therefore lessons to be learned and warnings to be heeded.

First, there are three cycles of three plagues each, followed by the final, fatal blow to Pharaoh's heart, the death of the first-born. As the cycles progress they increase with intensity and severity of destruction. The early plagues bring major discomfort but no death. The later plagues bring more physical discomfort and death to both beasts and human beings. The three plagues in each cycle also intensify in proximity to Pharaoh, moving from the external environment (Nile, flies, hail), to close proximity (frogs, livestock, locusts) and ultimately to contact with the skin (lice, boils, thick darkness).² The intensification suggests that God is invading deeper and deeper within the framework of Pharaoh's world. Each series opens "in the morning" (the opposite of Genesis, suggesting a movement from order to chaos), with Moses stationing himself to confront Pharaoh. With such clear repetition and intensification, even the most casual observer would be able to discern a divine hand at work, like a skilled surgeon cutting away the outer layers of Egyptian idolatry until the core of the cancer was exposed. There is indeed a "method in the madness."

We also find a repeated cycle of warnings to Pharaoh. The first two plagues are announced with a bold warning; the third in each cycle comes unannounced, with no such reminder. These six warnings are evidence of the patience and forbearance of God, who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:32), but is willing to offer the gift of repentance over and over again. It also points to the incredible dignity that God gives us as human beings. We are given full moral responsibility for our choices. God will judge no people, nation or leader for what they do not know (Rom 1:18-19). The death of all the firstborn in Egypt and the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea occurred solely because Pharaoh repeatedly refused to listen to the warnings inherent in nine plagues. Instead he chose to harden his heart. God also worked in the process of hardening, but his action is taken long after Pharaoh had resolutely set his heart in one direction. God's hardening acts to confirm Pharaoh in his own choices. Though we may never fully understand the mystery of divine sovereignty and "free will" (Rom 9:18), it is clear that God never removes mankind's absolute moral responsibility for its choices. When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, none of us will ever be able to claim ignorance.

The same held true for Israel. God promised the nation that he would never visit them with a plague without first giving them a clear warning through his prophets. If Israel experienced "plagues of judgment," it was because they refused to heed the warnings of the prophets. As the prophet Amos declares,

"If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble?
 If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?
 Surely the Lord God does nothing
 Unless He reveals His secret counsel
 To His servants the prophets." (Amos 3:6-7)

This repetitive structure of the plagues ought to teach us how to examine our own lives. How many subtle warnings has God

given us regarding idolatry? Have we observed him over time moving closer and closer into the imaginative world where we try and hide from him? Have external events caught our attention, or has his still small voice invaded the night? Can we perceive physiological systems breaking out from the stress of our hidden habits?

Knowing the structure of the plagues should also equip us to engage our present world to know where God is at work advancing his kingdom. After God has placed his powerful hand on an individual or community to expose their idols, they are often very tender and open to spiritual things. Then they need the word of healing that only the gospel can give. At that time we should be especially sensitive to come alongside people and help ask the probing questions that might lead them to repentance.

In summary, the structure of the plagues reveals that there is indeed a "method in the madness." The divine surgeon is alive and well, methodically exposing and laying bare the idols of the world.

The second question I would like to address is, What was God's purpose in their duration?

II. What was God's purpose in the plagues, especially in their long duration?

When we observe a reign of evil unleashed on the world, we often have difficulty understanding why God, who is all-powerful, seems to allow it to go on for so long before taking decisive action. If God was really concerned with the suffering of his people, why didn't he immediately deal a death blow to Pharaoh instead of negotiating with him and allowing his hard heart to put his nation through so much indiscriminate suffering? This is certainly the question that plagued many Jews during the Holocaust. For some it meant the loss of their faith. The question isn't new. It has been put forth by every generation in their walk of faith. We think of Jeremiah's poignant laments, the despair of the abandoned exiles in Babylon (Ps 137), the horror of Habakkuk's cry (Hab 1:2-4), Job's painful pleas, Nehemiah's tortured prayer (Neh 1:4), and Jesus' cry of dereliction (Ps 22:1). In our own church I have heard it in Gus Marwieh's tears as he has wept for God's mercy on his war-torn country of Liberia.

The plagues of Exodus certainly don't solve the mystery, but they do reveal one reason why God delayed his justice in Egypt. This may help us begin to build a lens to interpret our own history. In the seventh plague, which is the longest and most comprehensive, God tells Pharaoh that he is about to unleash his heaviest heavenly artillery yet, taking aim right at Pharaoh's heart:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let My people go, that they may serve Me. For this time I will send all My plagues on you [lit. "upon your heart"] and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth." (Exod 9:13-14 NASB)

Because Pharaoh has chosen to harden his heart, God will direct his blows right at that target. After the severest barrage of hail, thunder and lightning that Egypt has even seen, Pharaoh will know that Yahweh is not just one local deity among many; he is Lord of all the earth. Then God goes on to tell Pharaoh why he has restrained his holy power from killing the arrogant dictator:

"For if by now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth. But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth." (Exod 9:15-16)

Pharaoh deserved the death penalty for his heinous crimes,

yet God tells him that he restrained his strong hand from executing justice, because preserving his life for the time being is actually serving a larger purpose. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart will allow God to display his power to such an extent that it will be proclaimed throughout the whole earth. So God will actually cooperate with Pharaoh and aid the hardening process. As Fretheim points out, "God's purposes in these events are not focused simply on the redemption of Israel. God's purposes span the world. God is acting in such a public way so that God's good news can be proclaimed to everyone (see Rom 9:17)."³ The whole world is to "know" that there is no one like Yahweh on the earth. The Hebrew idea of "knowing" is not merely abstract or intellectual, but a deep, abiding, relational experience. As we trace our way through the plagues, we can observe this "knowing" process working out at every level of Egyptian society as the Creator makes a holy differentiation between the gods of Egypt and the God of Israel, Pharaoh and Moses, Pharaoh's servants and God's servants, and the Egyptian population and the Israelites.

As the plagues progress, the once confident magicians, who earlier had no trouble producing imitation "wonders," finally confess to Pharaoh that they have met their match in the third plague of the gnats, and reluctantly give glory to God.

"The magicians tried with their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not; so there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.'" (Exod 8:18-19a; cf. 31:18; Luke 11:20)

Later, they are not only upstaged by God, they also become victims of the plague. When Moses took handfuls of soot from a kiln and threw them in the air, they became fine dust all over Egypt and produced boils on man and beast. This time the magicians could not even enter the contest to duplicate the miracle, because the boils were all over them, rendering them unclean.

As the plagues continued to intensify, a breach of solidarity occurs within Pharaoh's court as some of his servants began to take God's warnings seriously. Before the plague of hail, God graciously allows the Egyptians to take protective measures to lessen their losses:

"Now therefore send, bring your livestock and whatever you have in the field to safety. Every man and beast that is found in the field and is not brought home, when the hail comes down on them, will die." The one among the servants of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD made his servants and his livestock flee into the houses; but he who paid no regard to the word of the LORD left his servants and his livestock in the field. (Exod 9:19-21)

Apparently the Lord was making a lasting impression on the upper levels of Egyptian society. When Moses returns and announces still another plague, many of Pharaoh's servants see the handwriting on the wall and are absolutely amazed that Pharaoh cannot. With great courage they confront their king with his stubborn stupidity:

Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God. Do you not realize that Egypt is destroyed?" (Exod 10:7)

Through the long, painful process, God also solicits more than one confession out of Pharaoh. After the intense thunder and hail had devastated the land, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron. He confesses his sin and gives glory to God:

"I have sinned this time; the LORD is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones. Make supplication to the LORD, for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail; and I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer." (Exod 9:27-28)

But perhaps the most amazing response comes from the Egyptian population:

The LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Furthermore, the man Moses himself was greatly esteemed in the land of Egypt, both in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people. (Exod 11:3)

Now the sons of Israel had done according to the word of Moses, for they had requested from the Egyptians articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing; and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have their request. Thus they plundered the Egyptians. (Exod 12:35-36)

The Egyptian people were far more spiritually receptive than the leaders of the nation. They send the Israelites away with their wealth to give honor to the Creator God. God's delay of justice was working greater purposes in Egypt. It gave opportunity for God to display his power and solicit a confession from every aspect of Egyptian society, from Pharaoh and his court to the Egyptian populace. And this confession of glory was to continue throughout all history in Israel:

"that you may tell in the hearing of your son, and of your grandson, how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I performed My signs among them, that you may know that I am the LORD." (Exod 10:2)

Perhaps this suggests that the longer the delay of God's justice, the greater he is making the stage for the glory of his name. This same pattern occurred in the life of David. Right after he was anointed king he was banned to a lengthy sojourn in the wilderness. Though the time was intensely painful for David, God's powerful hand was working behind the scenes so that everyone in Israel, including Saul himself, confessed that David was the rightful king (1 Sam 24:17-20; 26:25). As so it shall be for Jesus, "so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

Perhaps you find yourself stuck in an oppressive situation that is beyond your control. Many times your only prayer is to escape the situation, but the plagues of Exodus may suggest that God is indeed working behind the scenes, breaking down walls that you cannot see to give glory to his name. I am impressed that when the apostle Paul was in prison, he requested prayer not just for his immediate release, but also for an open door for evangelism (Col 4:2-4; Phil 1:12-13; 4:22).

In summary, we have seen that the plagues have a purpose both in their structure and in their long duration. Finally, can we discern from them a pattern of hope for Israel's future?

III. Plague Patterns in the Future

The pattern of these plagues not only instructed the Hebrews in Egypt to know how God was working in their world, they also served as a pattern for how God would shape their future. The memory of the Exodus was what gave Israel an anchor, even in the darkest of times when it seemed the created order had reverted to chaos. Hundreds of years after the Exodus, a locust plague ravished the landscape of Israel. To help the nation respond to the disaster, the prophet Joel interpreted the significance of the destruction based on what God had done to Egypt. He portrays the locusts metaphorically, like an invincible army invading the land, leaving a swath of destruction in their wake:

**"For a nation has invaded my land,
Mighty and without number;
Its teeth are the teeth of a lion,
And it has the fangs of a lioness." (Joel 1:6)**

But just as with the plagues of Egypt, this ecological disaster was not a final judgment but a warning of an ominous historical disaster on the horizon. The locust invasion was a foretaste of the terrible "Day of the LORD," when God will send an invincible army to invade the land of Israel and judge his people. To cap-

ture the horror of this army, Joel uses an extended metaphor from the memory of the locusts. First, he describes their appearance from a distance as they invade the land and their impact upon the onlooker:

**Their appearance is like the appearance of horses;
And like war horses, so they run.
With a noise as of chariots
They leap on the tops of the mountains,
Like the crackling of a flame of fire consuming the stubble,
Like a mighty people arranged for battle.
Before them the people are in anguish;
All faces turn pale. (Joel 2:4-6; cf. Rev 9:3, 7)**

Then the prophet describes their bold approach and invincible power as they break through the city walls. So great is their power, it is as if the entire created order has come unglued:

**They run like mighty men,
They climb the wall like soldiers;
And they each march in line,
Nor do they deviate from their paths.
They do not crowd each other,
They march everyone in his path;
When they burst through the defenses,
They do not break ranks.
They rush on the city,
They run on the wall;
They climb into the houses,
They enter through the windows like a thief.
Before them the earth quakes,
The heavens tremble,
The sun and the moon grow dark
And the stars lose their brightness. (Joel 2:7-10)**

The plagues of Exodus gave the prophet not only a framework to understand the chaos, but the ability to offer Israel hope in the midst of tragedy. Since their plight was not a haphazard quirk of fate, but a sign that God was at work confronting them with their own idolatry, there was something very practical that Israel could do: they could repent and avoid the future calamity. They did not have to be like Pharaoh and harden their hearts to their own destruction. So Joel calls all the leaders of Israel to consecrate a fast and to cry out to the Lord for mercy (1:13-14). If they do repent, Joel assures them that God will answer their prayer and bring full restoration. The early and late rains will come again, the threshing floors will be full of grain, and vats will overflow with wine (2:23-24).

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln made a similar call to all Americans in the wake of the Civil War.

It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord.

We know that by His divine law, nations, like individuals, are subject to punishments and chastisements in this world. May we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war which now desolates the land may be a punishment inflicted upon us for presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole person?

Lincoln went on to say that America had been a blessed nation, but had forgotten God. Therefore he proposed that all Americans set aside the fourth Thursday in November to give thanks with one voice to God. Lincoln's call to repentance to set aside a day for prayer and thanksgiving was based on the same theology of hope that Joel gave the Israelites.

Joel went on to tell Israel that God would make up for them all the years that the locusts had eaten:

**"Then I will make up to you for the years
That the swarming locust has eaten,
The creeping locust, the stripping locust and the gnawing locust,
My great army which I sent among you." (Joel 2:25)**

This is followed with an even greater promise of restoration. Just as the plagues on Egypt paved the way for the freedom and birth of the nation of Israel, so now this locust plague in Israel will pave the way for a new age of life. The outpouring of the early and late rains on the land will be just a foretaste of an outbreak of spiritual life:

**"It will come about after this
That I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind;
And your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your old men will dream dreams,
Your young men will see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days." (Joel 2:28-29)**

God's restoration will bring about an unprecedented measure of life in Israel. The Holy Spirit will come down like rain from heaven. It will not be a drizzle, however, but a torrential outpour! The Holy Spirit will not be given selectively to those with particular offices (prophets, priests and kings), nor temporarily (as the Lord took it away from Saul). The Spirit will be given generously without measure (*shaphak* "to pour out," see Ezek 39:29; Zech 12:10), and without sexual distinctions ("sons and daughters"), age distinctions ("old men," "young men") and social distinctions ("male and female servants"). To grasp the magnitude of God's generosity, Joel picks up more images from the plagues to show that this coming age will be nothing less than a new creation of the cosmos:

**"I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth,
Blood, fire and columns of smoke.
The sun will be turned into darkness
And the moon into blood
Before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes." (Joel 2:30-31)**

When we are faced with the consequences of our destructive choices, one of the most difficult things to overcome is the sense that we have lost hope: hope not just that we can be forgiven, but that the damage that we have caused can be repaired and restored. A theology from the plagues teaches us that God is not only committed to laying bare the world of its idols, he is even more committed to restoring it with life. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit unleashed such power it was as if the whole created order was shaken. The generation who first received this promise was the one that turned their backs on Christ and handed him over to be crucified. On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter quoted from this text, holding out Joel's offer to any of that generation who would hear: "And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). The same offer is available to you. No matter what you have done in your past, if you will repent and return, not only will your sins be wiped away, you will receive the gift of life in an unprecedented measure. This is what Peter later called "times of refreshing...from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). Why wait any longer?

1. Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 76.

2. Special thanks to Bob London for these observations.

3. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 125.

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The Literary Structure of the Plagues Narrative¹
Nahum M. Sarna

Plague	Text	Forewarning	Time indication of warning	Instruction Formula	Agent
1. Blood	7:14-24	yes	"in the morning"	"Station yourself"	Aaron
2. Frogs	7:25-8:11	yes	none	"Go to Pharaoh"	Aaron
3. Lice	8:12-15	none	none	none	Aaron
4. Insects	8:16-28	yes	"in the morning"	"Station yourself"	God
5. Pestilence	9:1-7	yes	none	"Go to Pharaoh"	God
6. Boils	9:8-12	none	none	none	Moses
7. Hail	9:13-35	yes	"in the morning"	"Station yourself"	Moses
8. Locusts	10:1-20	yes	none	"Go to Pharaoh"	Moses
9. Darkness	10:21-23	none	none	none	Moses
10. Death of Egyptian Firstborn	11:4-7 12:29-30	yes	none	none	God