

The 10 Plagues

Exodus 7-12

I. Introduction

- A. Our focus will be to better understand the narrative of the 10 plagues in Exodus 7-12. A deeper understanding of the text will come through reviewing the literary structure and relevant cultural background.
- B. We will also see how this narrative bears significance as a pattern for later biblical authors to understand how God graciously brings salvation through judgment.

II. Literary Structure

- A. The account of the plagues exhibits a clear literary structure that consists of three cycles of three plagues climaxing in the tenth.
- B. The chart below by David Dorsey (*Literary Structure of the Old Testament*) gives this basic structure of three cycles along with his expanded analysis that places the three cycles at the center of a chiasm.

6.24 Yahweh rescues his people from Egypt (Exodus 6:14–13:16)

- a **Yahweh promises to rescue his people from Egypt; the recommissioning of Moses and Aaron (6:14–7:7)**
 - Yahweh will bring them out (*hōšîʔ*) from Egypt by their hosts (*ʿal-šibʾōtām*); to bring out (*hōšîʔ*) from Egypt his hosts (*šēbāʾōt*), the Israelites
 - "Moses and Aaron did so; as Yahweh had commanded them, so they did"
 - chronological note: ages of Moses and Aaron
- b **Yahweh's power to create life (7:8–13)**
 - initial sign (*mōpēt*) to pharaoh: Aaron's rod becomes a snake
- c **opening cycle of three plagues (7:14–8:19 [7:14–8:15])**
 - each introduced by Yahweh's instructing Moses/Aaron to stretch forth his hand with rod, followed by statement that Moses/Aaron does so, initiating plague
- d **CENTRAL CYCLE of three plagues: Yahweh begins plagues without hand and rod of Moses/Aaron (8:20–9:12 [8:16–9:12])**
- c' **closing cycle of three plagues (9:13–10:29)**
 - each introduced by Yahweh's instructing Moses/Aaron to stretch forth his hand with rod, followed by statement that Moses/Aaron does so, initiating plague
- b' **Yahweh's power to terminate life (11:1–10)**
 - final sign (*mōpēt*) declared: death of firstborn
- a' **Yahweh rescues his people from Egypt; commemorative institutions (12:1–13:16)**
 - Yahweh brings them out (*hōšîʔ*) from Egypt by their hosts (*ʿal-šibʾōtām*); "the hosts (*šēbāʾōt*) of Yahweh went out (*yāšāʾ*) from the land of Egypt"
 - "the people did so; as Yahweh had commanded Moses and Aaron so they did"
 - chronological note: length of years of sojourn in Egypt

- C. Features of the first plague in each cycle:
1. The first plague in each cycle starts with instructions to go and stand before Pharaoh “in the morning” by the Nile (7:14-15; 8:20; 9:13 [no mention of water]).
 2. Each explains God’s purpose in sending the plagues:
 - 7:17 – “By this you shall know that I am the Lord”
 - a. 8:22 – “That you may know that I, the LORD, am in the midst of the land”
 - b. 9:14 – “So that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth”
- D. Features of the second plague in each cycle: Each is introduced with “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh’ at his palace (?) (8:1; 9:1; 10:1).
- E. Features of the third plague in each cycle
1. The third plague in each cycle gets straight to the action and has no instruction to go and warn Pharaoh (8:16; 9:8; 10:21).
 2. These narratives are generally shorter than the others in each cycle.
- F. Features of the first cycle:
1. For the first plague: “seven days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile”; on the last plague the magicians recognized God at work (8:19).
 2. The first cycle highlights the use of Aaron’s hand/staff.
 3. The magicians show up in all three plagues.
 4. The land is “foul” as a result of the first two.
 5. Introduce “irritations.”
- G. Features of the second cycle:
1. The second/middle cycle features no mention of either man’s staff. God acts directly, though the plague of boils comes about through Moses and Aaron throwing handfuls of soot from a kiln (9:8-10).
 2. The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart for the final plague.
 3. Escalation: introduce “destructions.”
- H. Features of the third cycle:
1. The third cycle highlights the use of Moses’s hand/staff.
 2. There is a note about nothing like this ever happening before in Egypt and about Pharaoh confessing his sin for the first and second plague.
 3. The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart for the final two plagues.
 4. Escalation: introduce “death.”
 5. The last plague: “there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days”; on the first plague, some servants feared the word of the Lord (9:20-21).

- I. The tenth plague is the final climactic event. The section that covers it is much larger than the previous nine. Dorsey offers the following chiastic structure for understanding how the material after 11:1-10 is arranged.

6.25 Yahweh rescues his people from Egypt (Exodus 12:1–13:16)

- a **instructions for preparing for plague on firstborn** (12:1–13)
 - lamb sacrificed (so Yahweh will not slay firstborn Israelites as he will firstborn Egyptians)
 - b **memorial of eating of unleavened bread** (12:14–20)
 - c **Passover meal instructions** (12:21–28)
 - Moses gives instructions to the people regarding the Passover meal (*pesah*)
 - ends: “the Israelites did as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron; thus they did (*kēn ‘āsū*)”
 - d **CENTER: the exodus and tenth plague** (12:29–42)
 - c’ **additional Passover meal instructions** (12:43–50)
 - Yahweh gives further instructions regarding the Passover meal (*pesah*)
 - ends: “all the Israelites did as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron; thus they did (*kēn ‘āsū*)”
 - b’ **memorial of eating of unleavened bread** (13:3–10)
 - a’ **instructions for memorial of redeeming of firstborn** (13:11–16)*
 - redemption of firstborn by lamb to commemorate slaying of firstborn Egyptians and sparing of firstborn Israelites
- *Cf. 13:1–2, which may be misplaced in the present text.

III. Cultural Background

A. The Gods of Egypt

1. Exodus 12:12 – “Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD”
2. Egyptian culture was polytheistic. The [chart below](#) is by Gary E. Schnittjer and connects known Egyptian gods to the 10 plagues. God’s power displayed through the plagues not only created havoc in Egypt. It also demonstrated his power over Egyptian deities.

Egyptian Gods Against Whom the Plagues Were Possibly Directed

<i>Nile to blood</i>	Hapi (also called Apis), the bull god, god of the Nile; Isis, goddess of the Nile; Khnum, ram god, guardian of the Nile; others
<i>Frogs</i>	Heqet, goddess of birth, with a frog head
<i>Gnats</i>	Set, god of the desert storms
<i>Flies</i>	Re, a sun god; Uatchit, possibly represented by the fly
<i>Death of livestock</i>	Hathor, goddess with a cow head; Apis, the bull god, symbol of fertility

<i>Boils</i>	Sekhmet, goddess with power over disease; Sunu, the pestilence god; Isis, healing goddess
<i>Hail</i>	Nut, the sky goddess; Osiris, god of the crops and fertility; Set, god of the desert storms
<i>Locusts</i>	Nut, the sky goddess; Osiris, god of the crops and fertility
<i>Darkness</i>	Re, the sun god; Horus, a sun god; Nut, a sky goddess; Hathor, a sky goddess
<i>Death of firstborn</i>	Min, god of reproduction; Heqet, goddess who attended women at childbirth; Isis, goddess who protected children; Pharaoh's firstborn son considered a god

B. Egyptian Beliefs About the Afterlife

1. Egyptians believed that after death, the deceased had to enter the hall of judgment and reply to a long list of charges: "I have not spoken lies. I have not uttered evil words. I have not caused pain..." If the person said they were innocent of all these sins, they would live forever.



2. The catch was that his heart would be taken out and placed on the scale to serve as a "lie detector." The human heart, the Egyptians reasoned, would always reveal the truth, weighing down the scale if the dead person was guilty.
3. To avoid being betrayed by their truthful heart, the Egyptians carved a charm shaped like a heart and a scarab (dung beetle) out of solid rock. They then tied

this heart of stone close over the mummy's heart or put it in his chest cavity. Incantations supposedly made the heart take on the qualities of the heart scarab, hardening it so that it could be dishonest and not weigh down the scale (Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out*).



4. Greg Beale writes in *Redemptive Reversals and the Ironic Overturning of Human Wisdom*: “The scarab beetle was a symbol of the sun god, of whom Pharaoh was viewed as the incarnation, and they thought it had magical powers to suppress the heart's tendency to confess sin so that salvation could be secured. Thus it was actually the magical power of the divine Pharaoh that imposed this silence upon the heart and was responsible for the individual's salvation.

There were various magical spells written on the stone scarab heart to bring about the silence of the human heart. The magical power of the sun god (and Pharaoh) was believed to transfer the stillness of the stone heart to the deceased so that the heart's movements to confess sin would be transformed into the stonelike stillness of silence. This suppression of the heart's confession apparently came to be seen as a kind of "hardening of the heart."

Whereas the pharaoh's magical hardening caused a nonconfession of sin and an apparent sinless heart, resulting in salvation, the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart appears to have led to his own heart confessing sin (cf. Ex. 9:27, 34; 10:16–17) and acknowledging his sinfully heavy condition, resulting in judgment (cf. Ex. 14:4, 17–28). Whereas Pharaoh's hardening the hearts of others falsely suppressed sin, the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart rightly revealed the monarch's sin.

The Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart may have been intended, in part, to show that the Egyptian way of salvation is a sham and was really the very opposite—a way of damnation. In fact, is it not interesting that the dead Pharaoh was the only Egyptian who did not have to go through the judgment process, but now, more than any other Egyptian in the exodus narrative, he is the focus of God's hardening judgment? It is probably no coincidence that one of the Hebrew words used for the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh means "to make heavy." Ironically, the pharaoh who claimed to remove the sinful heaviness of others' hearts could not remove his own. The pharaoh himself had now "been weighed on the scales and found deficient" (Dan. 5:27) and awaited impending judgment at the Red Sea. Pharaoh's heart became literally like the stone heart that symbolized his power and ironically caused him to be hard and insensitive to God's commands, which led to his destruction. Because of his stone heart, he sank like a stone in the Red Sea."

IV. Significance of the Plagues

- A. How do the literary structure and cultural background inform our reading of Exodus 7-12?
 1. Three Cycles:
 - a. First Cycle: "By this you shall know that I am the Lord" (7:17)
 - b. Second Cycle: "That you may know that I, the LORD, am in the midst of the land" (8:22)
 - c. Third Cycle: "So that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth" (9:14)
 2. 10th Plague: "So that my wonders will be multiplied in the land of Egypt" (11:9)
 3. Ironic Reversals:
 - d. "Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD" (12:12)
 - e. Pharaoh's hardened heart
 4. Other observations?

B. How do the plagues fit into the overall narrative of Exodus, the Old Testament, and the whole Bible?

1. Book of Exodus

a. The plagues bring salvation for God's people through judgment. Compare Exodus 1:1-22 with 11:1-15:19:

i. Exodus 1:1-22:

- 70 Israelites came down to Egypt (1:5)
- Pharaoh seeks to kill Israelite male babies with help from the midwives in order to control the population (1:15-21).
- Pharaoh seeks to kill Israelite male babies by drowning them in the Nile (1:22)

ii. Exodus 11:1-15:19

- 600,000 Israelite men leave Egypt (12:37)
- The Lord kills the firstborn sons of Egypt (11:5-7; 12:29-30)
- The Lord kills Pharaoh and his army by drowning them in the Red Sea (14:26-31; 15:1-19)
- Israel spent 430 years in Egypt (12:40-41)

b. However, the plagues are not merely a way to free Israel. They are designed to discredit Egypt's gods and demonstrate God's uniqueness and power.

2. Old Testament – Examples

a. Psalms – Recalling the Exodus

- Psalm 78:12-13 – “Wrought wonders,” “divided the sea”
- Psalm 105:25-39 – Darkness, waters turned to blood, frogs, flies, gnats, hail and flaming fire, locusts, firstborn
- Psalm 106:7-9a – “He rebuked the sea and it dried up, and He led them through the deeps, as through the wilderness”
- Psalm 114 – “The sea looked and fled”

b. Isaiah – Repeating the Exodus

- Isaiah 19 – “The idols of Egypt will tremble”; “deliver the Egyptians into the hands of a cruel master”; “waters of the sea will dry up”; Egypt will be saved in a similar fashion that Israel was saved from Egypt (19:19-22)
- Isaiah 25 – Song of Moses for a new generation
 - Isaiah 25 – “Wonders” (1), “mountain” (6, 7, 10), “swallowed” (7, 8) “Moab” (10)
 - Exodus 15 – “Wonders” (11), “mountain” (17), “swallowed” (12), “Moab” (15)

3. Whole Bible
 - a. Christ's Death on the Cross: Matthew 27:45-54 (cf. 26:26-29); Mark 15:33-39 (cf. 14:22-25); Luke 23:44-49 (cf. 22:14-23)
 - i. Exodus 10:21-29 – Darkness
 - ii. Exodus 11-12 – Death of firstborn
 - b. Revelation:
 - i. Fourth Seal: Revelation 6:8 – “pestilence,” “wild beasts” [flies]”
 - ii. Seven Trumpets: Revelation 8:1-11:19 – Thunder and lightning; hail and fire, mixed with blood; sea turned to blood; darkness; locusts.
 - iii. Seven Bowls of Wrath: Revelation 16:1-21 – New Song of Moses; Malignant sore; sea, rivers, and springs turned to blood; scorch men with fire (Ex. 9:23?); darkness; river dried up; frogs; lightning, thunder, and hail.
 - c. Resurrection of Believers: 1 Corinthians 15:54-57 – Swallowed
 - i. Isaiah 25:7-8 as an “echo” of Exodus 15:12 and 7:12

V. Conclusion

- A. God is at the center of the Exodus story, which is about his power and reputation.
- B. God has led us in a new Exodus through Christ, which will culminate in the New Creation (Rev. 21-22). We are freed from sin to serve the Lord.
- C. Resisting the Lord is futile (Rom. 9:14-23). Obedience is to be the hallmark of God's people.
- D. Other take-aways?