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THE “LADDER” OF THE LORD’S PLAGUES

by

Kasey DeVine

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This paper was written under the direction of




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THE “LADDER” OF THE LORD’S PLAGUES

Description: This paper discusses the first chapters of the book of Exodus, in which God identifies himself to Moses and announces God’s intentions to “smite Egypt by doing all kinds of wondrous deeds there.” With each sign, another aspect of God’s control and supremacy is showcased – and each is more powerful than the last. In this way, God’s signs become much like climbing the rungs of a ladder – the further along you get, the more dangerous your position becomes. The text is approached as a narrative drama, with the final form taking precedence over source or historical criticism. Details point to the signs and wonders as a focal point of the Exodus, telling the story of Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, and God in a fantastic drama with the ever-increasing impressions of both suspense and imminent expectation.

This paper may be duplicated



March 25, 2011

The “Ladder” of the LORD’s Plagues

In the first chapters of the book of Exodus, God identifies himself to Moses and announces God’s intentions to “smite Egypt by doing all kinds of wondrous deeds there.” His motives become evident in Moses’ first divine encounter in Exodus 3:6-9. God has witnessed the affliction and suffering of His people in Egypt and heard them cry out. The fulfillment of the promise of the land will now take center stage in the Exodus narrative, and the redemption of the Hebrew slaves is to be brought about by a series of Yahweh’s “signs and wonders.” The announcement that the wonders will strike the palace of Pharaoh, and indeed all of Egypt as well, marks the beginning of a battle between Yahweh and the earthly representation of the Egyptian Gods – a battle in which the Lord has already staked a claim to victory (Ex 3:20-21). In this paper, I am primarily concerned with a dramatic reading of the text as a narrative that will show the relationship between Yahweh, Israel, and Israel’s oppressors in the context of one of the most important stories in the memory of Israel. The signs and wonders, also commonly referred to as “plagues,” “strikes,” or “calamities,” (I’ll use these interchangeably, even though “sign” appears to be most descriptive of God’s purpose and “plague” may actually only refer to the slaying of the firstborn) are the means by which God demonstrates power and control over Israel’s oppressors and legitimacy as the liberator and protector as promised in the covenant beginning with Abraham. With each sign, another aspect of God’s control and supremacy is showcased – and each is more powerful than the last. In this way, God’s signs become much like climbing the rungs of a ladder – the further along you get, the more dangerous your position becomes. These details point to the signs and wonders as a focal point of the Exodus, telling the story of Moses, Aaron,

Pharaoh, and God in a fantastic drama with the ever-increasing impressions of both suspense and imminent expectation. Before delving into this drama, there are a fair amount of themes that require attention, and touching on some source criticism may be helpful in a discussion of the story's structure; yet, along with historical criticism, source criticism will play a relatively small role in demonstrating the reading I've constructed. Source criticism can show us how the pieces of the narrative come together, which for my purposes is not as important as what the final form of the text tells us about the characters of God and Israel.

One of the important motifs that merits discussion before getting into individual signs and wonders performed by God through the agency of Moses and Aaron is the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart. Over the course of the story, Pharaoh's heart is often said to be hardened, meaning that he is not convinced that he should allow the Israelites to leave. Hebrew translations into English present one of the difficulties in understanding the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart. In modern English the "hardening of the heart" is conceivably more negative than intended by the authors and editors of the Exodus – perhaps it might be associated with an uncaring or willful cruelty. Some readings of Pharaoh's "hardness of heart" describe it as a display of ignorance or the active rejection of God (often achieved by comparing the hardness of heart motif in Exodus to where it appears elsewhere in the Bible), but the Hebrew verbs say little to describe such attitudes. Three Hebrew terms are translated into the verb "to harden": *kbd*, "to be heavy;" *hzk*, "to be strong;" and, according to Carol Meyers, just once as a literary substitute for *hzk*, *qšh*, "to harden." The term *hzk* is the dominant Hebrew term used, and the priestly source's use of it "should be translated literally as pharaoh's heart becoming "strong" in its resolve

to refuse the release of the Israelites, for it does not necessarily have the negative connotations of hardheartedness conveyed by the NRSV” (Meyers 70). The New American Bible translates these verbs differently to perhaps escape the negative English undertones associated with “hardness of heart.” Pharaoh “remains obstinate,” “becomes obdurate,” and later as a sign of God’s supremacy “the LORD makes Pharaoh obstinate.” Another difficulty arises with the realization of *how* Pharaoh becomes obdurate and why he continues to be obdurate.

After each of the first five plagues Pharaoh becomes obdurate; his heart is hardened at the end of each plague, which sets up the following plague. However, after the sixth, seventh (Ex. 10:1), eighth, and ninth plagues, God makes pharaoh obstinate. This shift depicts a pattern toward divine causality taking precedence over human will. There is some argument over whether this discrepancy is either redactional or source specific, but when read fully, it adds to a rather effective literary device, increasing the drama and the presence of God as the plagues continue. “God has hardened Pharaoh’s heart for the purpose of bringing upon the Egyptians his plagues as ‘signs’” (Van Seters 88). Whether or not Pharaoh was originally in control of his stubbornness, it is now revealed after the sixth plague that God is completely in control at this point, proving his authority to both the Egyptians and the Israelites. God is not bringing these plagues to Egypt as a persuasion maneuver or bargaining chip; He is creating a demonstration so that He will “be known” as the universal sovereign. Van Seters goes on to compare Pharaoh’s obstinacy to the Israelites in the face of their prophets:

Pharaoh’s repeated failure to heed the word of God delivered by his servant Moses is like the stubbornness of the Israelites toward their

prophets as expressed in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Dtr, which was entirely their own doing...One may even discern a progression in J in which, after Pharaoh has repeatedly hardened his own heart, then repentance becomes impossible and God hardens Pharaoh's heart to prepare him for destruction...[The significance of the sign] has a clear "epistemic" function to lead to the knowledge of Yahweh as the real agent in the affairs of men and nations. (90-91)

His logic describes God's manipulation of Pharaoh's stubbornness as the reason the plagues might be known instead as "signs." Meyers explains a similar justification for the "signs" and God working through Pharaoh as a clever literary development:

What seems at first to be a power struggle between Yahweh and the pharaoh, in fact, is an artful and gripping display of how an ancient and prosperous culture, with understandable human difficulty – with hardness of heart – can acquiesce to the inevitable outcome ordained by God. (71)

The importance of the *heart* throughout all of this should be noted. In both biblical and Egyptian physiology, the heart is the center of all mental, intellectual, and spiritual capacities. Pharaoh's heart is overpowered by God condemning him to destruction; nothing could more fully manifest who is in full charge than the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Larsson 59).

The staffs of Moses and Aaron become another important part of the plague narratives, both as an introduction and a recurring motif later on. Although initially established as a sort of proof that Moses could display so that others might believe that God had indeed chosen him, the stretching out of the hand combined with the striking or

stretching out of the staff marks the beginning of the first three plagues. Prior to the first plague, Aaron's staff is put to use in Pharaoh's palace. The rod is turned into a serpent, or perhaps since the Hebrew term *tannîn* is used unlike when Moses' staff was first transformed into a *nahash* (serpent/snake), it would more likely be a dragon, crocodile, or sea creature. *Tannîn* is also used in Ezek 29:3 and 32:2 in which Pharaoh is depicted as a dragon that is destroyed. "A closer look at the symbolism shows this to be an ironic reversal. The staffs of the magicians become *tannîn* and Aaron's *tannîn* swallows theirs. Here God turns the tables, using a dragon to swallow up the chaos monster, as God will use the waters in chapter fifteen. This is a sign of Pharaoh's fate" (Fretheim 388). This introduction anticipates the events at the Red Sea – the swallowing of the serpents mirrors the swallowing of the Egyptians in the waters. Despite the fact that Aaron's staff devours those of the priests of Pharaoh, this feat is unimpressive – merely a beginning to God's interaction with Pharaoh and a foreshadowing of God's victory. The temple priests replicate the "serpent staff" without trouble, leaving plenty of room for the ante to be raised and the story to begin its climb to a climax.

Judging by the order and the makeup of the plagues, it is generally well known which sources contributed each part of the narrative. Van Seters lists the seven Yahwist (J) plagues and describes how a combination with the newer P source altered their presentation.

The P writer added three plagues, one between J's second and third, another between the fourth and fifth, and another between the sixth and seventh, producing three groups of three plus one. But P's treatment of those plagues (the gnats, the boils, and the darkness) are so entirely

different from J that it is easy to distinguish them. P also added the contest with the magicians in 7:8-13 and then inserted this motif in several of J's plagues as well. This obscured J's original scheme and created a new one. (80)

Van Seters goes on to show that the J source orders the events of each plague as follows:

(1) "Thus says Yahweh" as a commission to Moses to go to Pharaoh, (2) the divine command ("Let my people go that they may serve me"), (3) the warning or threat of judgment, (4) the statement of recognition of the deity ("By this you will know that I am Yahweh"), (5) the announcement of the plague by God, (6) Pharaoh's request for intervention, (7) Moses' request for intervention and divine agreement, and (8) the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The J source plagues are the Nile turning to blood, the frogs, the flies, the pestilence, the hail, the locust, and the death of the firstborn. The P source is the origin of the following elements and plagues: the rod changed into a *tannîn*, water into blood, frogs, gnats, and boils. A post-P redactor combines the two plague accounts, adding and subtracting material from both sources (Seters 103). Other elements with P characteristics (9:22, 23a, 35; 10:12, 13a, 20; 10:21-23, 27; 11:9-10) have been assigned to this redactor. In support of the view that P is an independent source, these post-P redactor verses presuppose the Yahwist's (J) narrative. The redactors assimilate the above verses, including J's original themes of hardness of heart and the stretching out of the hand and staff, into the three plagues solely contributed by the P source as well as introduce various P themes into J source plagues.

The artful insertion of P's elements leads to a new, easily recognizable structure. "Whether or not it originated as a composite of sources, its present canonical form is a

sophisticated literary structure that has been recognized as such since early postbiblical times. It consists of three triads” (Meyers 78). Meyers goes on to explain the elements that allow the plague cycles to be grouped like this. The first in each cycle is a warning in the morning, the second contains a warning, and the third occurs suddenly. The first cycle deals with water and is brought about using the hand/staff motif, the second deals with people and livestock and is brought about by varying methods, and the third deals with “airborne menaces” and is brought about by Moses’ hand. The final plague, the death of the firstborn, is a distinct strike that could be considered a climax, becoming possibly the most important plague and remaining separate from the three cycles.

As each plague is discussed it is important to observe the increasing sense of drama, among other specific supporting trends, created by the final combined form of the two sources (and their P source and deuteronomic redactors), which finds its eventual climax in the death of the firstborn.

We may note the developing elements in the plagues narrative, the decline of the magic motif, the increased dignity of the actors, the growing power of Moses' work, the added inclusiveness of the demand to confess Yahweh, and the actual increasing recognition of Him and his servant on the part of Pharaoh. (McCarthy 144-5)

The First Cycle – The Water Plagues

It is only fitting that the Nile be the target of the first strike brought upon Egypt. The great source of life and fertility in Pharaoh’s realm is changed to blood; the fish in the river die, and the water becomes undrinkable. The motif of the staff occurs early on –

Moses' staff is held in hand when the announcement of the sign is made, and Aaron's staff strikes the water to begin the transformation. The Nile turning to blood has multiple connections to various other parts of the Exodus. It was first used by Egypt against the Israelites as a deadly weapon of genocide by Pharaoh in Exod. 1:22, and now God turns the Nile against Egypt. It also may be worthwhile to notice that Moses, the agent through whom God is acting, was rescued from this very genocide by way of the Nile, which makes this strike against Pharaoh even more fitting. Meyers comes up with yet another parallel that the plague of the Nile embodies:

In addition, it is a water event par excellence. Note how many different terms (water, river, Nile, pools, canals, ponds) appear and how often many of them are repeated. This repetition foregrounds water and thereby foreshadows the ultimate water catastrophe, the splitting of the sea and drowning of the pharaoh's forces. (81)

However, the first display of water-to-blood seems to have little effect (yet it remains important to remember in the grand scheme of Yahweh's plan, this is merely the "lowest rung"). To begin with, this probably isn't the first time the Egyptians and Israelites had seen the Nile turned red as blood. Modern day studies of the river (though largely unnecessary for our purposes – the narrative remains central to this reading) have attributed the blood-like appearance of the Nile to either silt washed downstream from excess rainfall, algae, or volcanic ash, all of which might leave fish dead and the water undrinkable. Explanations like this surface for many of the signs and wonders since many of the signs and wonders occur occasionally in the natural world. "The signs and wonders are not unrelated to known ecological events. But it is the intensity and timing

of these calamities that takes them out of the realm of the ordinary and casts them into the arena of deliberate divine activity for a specific purpose” (Meyers 78-9). Second, Pharaoh’s priests, just as in the introductory “staffs into snakes” episode, are able to replicate the water to blood sign. P’s motif of the court priests is still stressed, but it is uncertain if the priests did this after Moses and Aaron acted or simultaneously. Third, the Egyptian’s response doesn’t treat this occurrence as if it were a disaster or a strike against them, the pharaoh, and their gods, but as if it were merely an inconvenience. “The state of complete and prolonged water pollution is not treated as a great calamity. The Egyptians dig for drinking water along the Nile, and Pharaoh returns to his palace – his heart hardened” (Dykstra 86). Pharaoh needs no additional rebuttal to this strike, as no mention is made of the removal of this sign. Seven days pass and the LORD tells Moses to go to Pharaoh again.

The second plague in the first three-plague cycle is the infestation of frogs. The coming of the frogs bears many similarities to the water changed to blood. The Nile is still the primary target, but frogs also appear in streams, canals, and pools, and then overrun the land.

The vivid language reveals how intimately the frogs will affect everyone: they will be in the homes of all, even in their beds and food. The narrative indicates the totality of Egyptians involved by listing three elements of the population – pharaoh, the officials, and the people. (Meyers 82)

Aaron’s stretched out hand and staff mark the beginning, much like in the “water to blood” sign. Also similar to the first sign, this is still more of a nuisance than a disaster. Even in the numbers described, frogs are only incredibly annoying, not a threat to life or

health (Dykstra 86). Occurrences of frog infestation are also not unheard of to the Egyptians, although this appears to be somewhat unique – no other culture has myths of frog inundation (Propp 349). But now we are shown how the frogs are actually one rung up on the “ladder of plague-severity.” When the magic/priest theme is visited, the priests are again able to replicate the act of bringing forth frogs, but yet they do not seem to be able to lift the plague. Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to stop the plague: “Pray the LORD to remove the frogs from me and my subjects, and I will let the people go to offer sacrifice to the LORD” (Ex 8:4). Moses lets Pharaoh decide when the plague will end – in order to be sure that the frogs’ disappearance will occur intentionally, not naturally. Afterwards Pharaoh remains obdurate.

The final sign of the first triad and the first major P source addition to be considered its own plague, the gnats (sometimes translated as lice or mosquitoes), is a short but nevertheless important step toward the climax of the story. The staff motif remains; Aaron strikes the dust of the earth, which turns into gnats throughout Egypt. The use of dust to form the gnats has significance in the life of Israel. “Dust” has been synonymous with the quality of being countless in Genesis, but also with death or the netherworld in Genesis, Job, Psalms, and Isaiah.

Dust is that from which human beings have come and to which they return upon death...The image suggests the end of the Egyptians. It is also an image used to speak of the humiliation of those who oppose the God of Israel, including the kings of the earth...Generally the use of “dust” as an image of mortality and humiliation is a sign that Pharaoh ignores at his peril. (Fretheim 389)

The new development bringing us one step up the “ladder of plague-severity” is in the magic/priest motif. Unlike in the previous plague of frogs, the priests *cannot even duplicate* this sign, despite their attempts to do so with their magic arts. It becomes clear to the priests that these signs are not magic, but the “finger of God” (Ex 8:15). The exact meaning of this statement is debatable. Some Jewish commentaries contend that the purpose of this phrase serves to distance the sign from Moses and Aaron, reinforcing the reason that priestly magic was unable to replicate its effects – it is truly a natural occurrence attributed only to God. “Whatever Pharaoh’s magicians meant, one thing is clear: although earlier through their miracles they sought to strengthen Pharaoh in his determination not to let the people go, their confession of God does not influence Pharaoh, and his heart remains hardened” (Larsson 53).

The Second Cycle – Yahweh’s Plagues of Infection

The first plague in the second cycle highlights even more of God’s power than in any previous sign and marks Pharaoh’s first concession to Moses and Aaron. In the sign of the flies, first comes the warning, common to the first two (J source) plagues of each cycle. But some of the elements of the first three signs are missing, replaced by new ones. The staff and priest motifs disappear, and the signs begin to look less and less dependant upon Moses, Aaron, and the pharaoh. The LORD says the sign will take place “tomorrow” if Pharaoh does not let the Israelites go, and the LORD does exactly that – without mention of an action of Moses or Aaron other than going to Pharaoh. This sign is also the first to be localized to the Egyptians – the palace, the servants’ houses, and all throughout Egypt. Pharaoh seems to finally be aware of God’s power, and says that he will let the Israelites go to sacrifice to the LORD, provided they pray for him. The flies

did damage to the land as well as having the same infestation-annoying quality that the gnats and frogs present. Moses prayed that God remove them, but their removal also becomes an important foreshadowing of the future. “The flies were removed so that ‘not one remained’ (8:27; cf 10:19). This phrase is repeated in 14:28, where not one Egyptian remained” (Fretheim 389). Pharaoh remains obdurate when the flies are removed.

The fifth sign is the pestilence, which affects animals alone. Meyers points to this as a logical follow up to the theme of sacrifice from the previous sign, when Moses asked Pharaoh to let the Israelites go to offer sacrifices to God. This sign will not be just an infestation of annoyance, but a strike against animals essential to Egypt's transport and food – yet again an increase in severity. Pestilence signifies judgment, the consequence of the fact that the pharaoh is still holding the Israelites against God's will (Meyers 84). This illustrates yet another significant step forward in the plague drama. Again Moses goes with a warning to Pharaoh, announcing that the strike will occur the following day. As in the flies sign, this will be specific to the Egyptians, in this case their livestock. Pharaoh yet again remains obdurate, and attempts to make no concessions as he did recently.

The last plague in the second cycle, the boils, is brought about by a fitting parallel to the last plague in the first cycle – through dust that Moses and Aaron throw into the air. This marks Aaron's last significant role and the list of important characters will soon shrink to God, Moses, and Pharaoh for the third cycle. As in the other P source plagues, the sign comes without warning to Pharaoh. The P source motif of the priests makes a final appearance, and fitting with an ever-increasing severity factor, the priests do not make an appearance to attempt to duplicate the sign's effect. Instead, they appear covered

in boils, demonstrating that they have been utterly defeated and are completely powerless to resist the effects of the boils. The plagues are beginning to do extensive damage, affecting both the Egyptian people and their animals. If Pharaoh had only been annoyed or impressed before, he must have certainly realized that these signs were now becoming destructive and it was in his best interest to let the Israelites go. But at this point Pharaoh can no longer do what is in the best interests of his people. He can only remain obdurate, and this is the first instance where the LORD hardens Pharaoh's heart instead of Pharaoh hardening his own heart (Exod. 9:12)

The Third Cycle – Airborne Menaces

As common in J source plagues, a warning begins the next plague sequence; the warning takes place in the morning, just as in each plague that begins one of the three cycles. The seriousness of the signs continues to grow; this time hail will destroy livestock, people, and crops. Interestingly, the staff motif reappears, except both the hand and the staff stretched out toward the sky belong to Moses. The display of this sign is both dramatic and magnificent, accompanied by lightning and thunder. “Such fierce hail had never been seen since the land of Egypt became a nation” (Ex. 9:24). Such rare and harsh weather patterns were undoubtedly a sign that “the earth is the LORD’s” (Ex. 9:29). Once again the sign is localized to the Egyptian people. Israel has received the information of the hail ahead of time – Yahweh warns them to find shelter for themselves and their livestock. Pharaoh’s reaction to this sign is unique to this entire narrative. “I have sinned again! The LORD is just; it is I and my subjects who are at fault. Pray to the LORD, for we have had enough of God’s thunder and hail. Then I will let you go; you need stay no longer” (Ex. 9:27, 28). Strong words like this make it seem almost certain

that Pharaoh will keep his word, but he indeed cannot. Pharaoh has previously acknowledged the power of the LORD and then promised to let the Israelites go, at least for a time. Now he not only realizes the grandeur of God but also has become aware of his own evil (Larsson 67). Pharaoh's guilt is greater now because he has become aware of his sin. Larsson continues, "The final chord in this chapter is therefore ominous and tragic. As soon as the pain of the plague has eased, he persists in his evil way again" (68). At the end of the episode Pharaoh and his servants become obdurate. Although it appears that we may be moving *away* from the climax, we actually find before the warning in the next plague account that God was in fact behind the obstinacy of both Pharaoh *and* his servants – so that he may perform his remaining signs. The entirety of the locust sign therefore includes this theme twice, but the first use should be attributed to the sign of hail, not the sign of locusts.

The eighth plague event begins with the warning. The significance of the locusts is highlighted just as in the hail sign, proving that this is yet again a climb toward the approaching climax: "Never before had there been such a fierce swarm of locusts, nor will there ever be" (Ex. 10:14). Unlike many of the early plagues, a theme of the rarity of the third plague cycle is made known within the text itself. These events are not similar to the perhaps common occurrences of the river turning red or the appearance of frogs. Pharaoh's servants now even plead with him to let the Israelite men go to worship ("Do you not realize that Egypt is being destroyed?" Exod 10:7), and Pharaoh agrees to that concession. He will not, however, allow the Israelites' sons, daughters, or flocks accompany them, and so the locusts come when Moses stretches his hand out over the land of Egypt. The locusts swarm over the whole land of Egypt and eat all of the

vegetation. Wind both brings them and destroys them, which is yet another foreshadowing of the Egyptians' eventual destruction. The locusts do not die or fly away, but the LORD hurls them into the Red Sea with a "strong west wind;" the waters of the Reed Sea are later parted with a "strong east wind." Drowning the locusts is synonymous with the drowning of the Egyptians. Pharaoh again admits to sin and this time additionally asks for forgiveness. Moses prays to the LORD to remove the locusts, and then the LORD makes Pharaoh obstinate.

To finish the third cycle, and as a final sign before the ultimate strike against Egypt, Moses stretches his hand to the sky and God brings a "dense darkness" throughout the land of Egypt for three days (it does not affect the Israelites). Like the final plague in each of the three cycles, there is no warning to Pharaoh. The darkness is an allusion to the darkness of midnight when the final plague will come. "As the last calamity, darkness serves as a motif that links the nine signs-and-wonders with the subsequent firstborn plague and then the deliverance at the sea" (Meyers 87). God is now demonstrating the epitome of his power over Egypt, its people, its pharaoh, and its gods. The Egyptians observe that their very source of light and life provided by the all-important Egyptian sun god can be taken away from them as if it had never existed. The darkness is the most serious plague (save the tenth) because darkness is chaos; it is a reversion to a precreation state of affairs and a removal of the separation between light and darkness. The plagues have taken the Egyptians from the fairly unimpressive and temporary river sign all the way through annoyances, afflictions, destruction, and finally an attack upon their very essence in an ultimate foreshadowing of the final blow. This time Pharaoh offers to let all of the Israelites go, but they must leave their flocks, perhaps

to ensure that they return. The flocks however, are needed for sacrifice which makes this “last ditch effort” of Pharaoh’s impossible. The LORD makes Pharaoh obstinate for a final time, and the pharaoh dramatically banishes Moses from the palace under the penalty of death, which effectively becomes the end to all of their negotiations.

The Final Strike – The Plague of Death

The final strike to Egypt and the climax of the plague narrative will be the death of the Egyptians’ firstborn. This is the most terrible and impressive of the blows struck against Egypt, and with it begins the attainment of the apparent object of all of Yahweh’s dealings with Egypt through Moses: because of it Pharaoh releases the Israelites (McCarthy 137). Moses announces that the LORD will go through the land at midnight, taking the life of every first-born, including that of the Pharaoh, the slave girls, and the animals. God will act alone; Moses and Aaron will no longer be his agents for the signs and wonders. This isn’t a warning as in previous signs, but an announcement. The theme of uniqueness as described in the third plague cycle is also attributed to this final plague. “There shall be a loud wailing throughout the land of Egypt, such as has never been, nor will ever be again” (Ex. 11:6). Moses describes how Pharaoh’s servants will beg the Israelites to leave, and then departs Pharaoh, who is “in hot anger.”

The Passover ritual separates the slaying of the firstborn from the other plagues, but also links the plague to the ritual of the paschal offering. The slaying of the firstborn is therefore forever directly tied to the Passover meal and the notion of freedom from bondage in the memory of the Israelites. Just as in the first plague, blood is used as a sign – this time marking the Israelites’ houses. But blood in this instance has a different sign value than earlier in the story: at first blood made the water undrinkable, but now as

a sign on the lintel, the blood functions apotropaically. At midnight, the LORD slays all of the firstborn and there was “loud wailing throughout Egypt,” just as announced. Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron and demands that the Israelites leave, which they do.

God’s reasoning for the slaying of the firstborn is complex, and has often troubled readers. The ultimate outcomes are well described – The LORD will be recognized as the “One-Who-Alone-Is” and God’s people will be liberated in order to serve him – but the intentional destruction of every firstborn may seem excessive. The LORD has described Israel as a firstborn son in Ex 4:22-23, in a warning to be given to Pharaoh that his firstborn will die if he refuses to let Israel go. Understanding the slaying of the firstborn as a literary element instead of a historical certainty is an important aspect of understanding God’s actions. The slaying of the firstborn is the perfect punishment for the crime of the enslavement of Israel, since at the same time it paints a picture of the unity of the LORD with His people, the Israelites.

The firstborn holds a symbolic place in the psychology of the biblical world. The first of any series represents all to come, and the death of all Egyptian firstborns serves as a death knell to the society as a whole. This harsh view of the Egyptians makes them the enemy par excellence, a position they hold throughout the Pentateuch. They become the quintessential other. (Meyer 94)

The slaying of the firstborn is the logical conclusion to the drama of the increasing power of the plagues. God’s signs grow in power until the final plague strikes the very society with chaos and death itself.

The plague narrative in its final form is a story of the gradual revelation of God's supremacy and mastery over all of the earth, animals, and people, as well as a description of his solitary authority over and responsibility for the Israelites. Various themes tie the plagues together and foreshadow the ultimate destruction of the Egyptian people – embodied in the slaying of the firstborn subsequently at the Red Sea. The signs are ever-increasing in strength and meant not to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites but to gradually exact a precise and just punishment upon Pharaoh for enslaving the LORD's firstborn son. God demonstrates His great power and control over any who might threaten His chosen people, and the growing intensity of the plagues highlights His lasting legitimacy as Israel's protector and sovereign.

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