

Helen White
Professor Rudd
Great Con 113
25 November 2019

The Plague Story: The Origins of Yahwism and Nationalistic Purpose

Legends and traditions have long served as unifying forces in human culture, especially in times when pride in an ethnic or national identity sustains morale. Such a need to preserve an identity arose among the Israelites in the wake of the Assyrian invasion, their exile, and their consequent struggle to maintain autonomy as a nation. Influenced by this period of duress for the Israelites, the declaratory introduction to the plagues in Exodus 7:1-7 recalls God's decisive action to save his chosen people, delivering them from Egypt. Shaped by multiple authors over time, the story provided comfort and guidance in a time of uncertainty as well as a call to return to the humble origins of Yahwism. Though modern research on Exodus has exposed its lack of historical credibility, the story continues to serve an important role in regards to its unifying purpose, revealing religious ideals of the era, and identifying the beginning of Yahwism as a religion among a larger group.

Though Exodus is traditionally attributed to Moses, modern scholars consider the book a careful compilation of the J (Jahwist), E (Elohlist), D (Deuteronomist), and P (Priestly) sources, and thus written centuries after the alleged time of the events in question, making exact historical accuracy virtually impossible. J most likely wrote around 800-700 BCE, near the time of the Assyrian invasion and consequent exile of Israel, while P wrote later, around 750-600 BCE. The plague story in particular appears to have been put together and supplemented by P from J's earlier writings in multiple places (Houston 68). P also implements the triad pattern of the plagues, where two occurrences are introduced by Moses and the third arrives unannounced. Moses follows God's calling in Exodus 7:1-7 to "speak all that [he] commands" and warn the Pharaoh, but every third plague arrives without a foreword. The pattern repeats itself three times, plus a final, devastating blow- the death of all the firstborn Egyptian children. Exodus 7:1-7 echoes both 3:16-22 and 6:2-13 in which God instructs Moses, who needs reassurance in

multiple instances leading up to the introduction of the plagues. Most likely, the passage was added by P to once again emphasize the power and authority of God over anyone else, as well as the ideal of monotheism. The crisis in which Israel found itself provided a major influence in the writings of P and J, as they focused on highlighting God and the devout faith they believed could save them. God's attention in the passage to the Egyptians knowing "that [he is] the Lord" through his calling of Moses shows the precedence of God over the enemies of the Israelites, providing a reminder of hope in a desperate age (Exodus 7:5). While J focuses on the origin of the Israelites and their traditions, especially Passover, P highlights God's covenant and connection with his chosen people, his power over them, and his dominance over those who oppose them. Together, they guide Israel's hope, demonstrating how the nation was once delivered from enemies before and how they may be delivered again.

The Bible tells the story of several groups of people throughout history interacting with God, his messengers, and his signs. Starting from creation, the Old Testament recounts the development of humanity and God's interference in life throughout generations. God focuses on chosen people, originally just individuals like Adam, Eve, and Noah. However, the scope expands in the instance of Abraham. God makes a covenant to bless not only him, but all of his descendants, who eventually become the Israelites. When Jacob, Abraham's grandson, leads his family (later called the Israelites) to Egypt, they are eventually enslaved and decades of oppression begin. God utilizes human mediums to demand the release of the suffering Israelites: the prophet Moses, a member of the Israelites raised by the Pharaoh's daughter, and the mouthpiece, his brother Aaron. Although Moses doubts his ability to carry out God's word, he is nonetheless chosen as Yahweh seizes the opportunity to prove his might. His goal in making both Israel and Egypt "know" him is part of a recurring revelatory theme throughout the Bible (Exodus 7:5). Often, God's purpose in interfering is to assert his authority and power over people, as shown in later books with his consistent concern over Israel worshipping idols and other gods. Overall, God aims to declare "I am Yahweh," both in the sense of his name and of his undisputed dominance. Exodus 7:1-7 outlines this

overarching intention, creating “one great self-revelation of God” where God speaks directly to Moses, exposing himself and his plans (Childs 118). By revealing himself, God’s words in this passage begin the tradition of Yahwism being a religious group with an identity, rather than a belief among chosen individuals or families.

The revelation of Yahweh is not a simple get-to-know-you: God’s stated plan to punish Egypt exposes harsher intentions in the passage. Divine retribution and punishment raise theological questions, especially regarding the brutality of the plagues and God’s decision to make Pharaoh unyielding. As discussed earlier, God aims to display his power and prove himself to Egypt. However, this undeniably comes at the cost of humanity, as God deliberately refuses to allow Pharaoh to repent and release the Israelites, unleashing further plagues and suffering on the Egyptian people. Israel suffers too, forced to remain in slavery longer than absolutely necessary. The portrayal of God in these events deems human pain inconsequential in the ultimate goal of gaining glory for multiple potential reasons. Firstly, simply freeing the Israelites without consequences for the Egyptians would have been perceived as more unjust than bringing down extreme punishment on them (Berlin and Grossman). The need for revenge against Egypt takes precedence over God’s mercy and forgiveness because the nation does not worship God and therefore Yahweh cannot spare them. However, the main rebuke targets Pharaoh, whose initial unrelenting attitude condemned him and his people to the wrath of God. The plagues also serve as a means to an end to explain tradition. Without the first “great acts of judgement,” the story lacks a buildup to the tenth plague, the Passover, an important observance still kept by Jews at the era of Exodus’ authorship (Muntingh 121). Because a major purpose of Exodus as a text is to explain the origins and reasons behind Passover, the preceding events integrate an understanding of the final story. Finally, God fails to proclaim himself “merciful and gracious, slow to anger” before Exodus 34:6. Before this declaration, God often strikes down on the sins of humanity, rather than forgiving and showing mercy. Just as Israel journeys out of Egypt to form their new identity worshipping Yahweh, Yahweh too continues to cultivate his

relationship with Israel and humanity as a whole. God's decision to sharply punish Egypt reflects the author's ideas of just treatment, God's connection to Egypt, and the final goal of explaining the causes for the Passover tradition.

God's introduction to the plagues also begins the rescue/punishment pattern that repeats itself throughout Exodus and beyond. When God witnesses the Israelites' evil ways, he proceeds to either bring about or fail to prevent the nation falling into disarray. However, the Israelites then repent and pray to God, reminding him of his covenant to Abraham and Jacob, and Yahweh opts to save them time and time again. Usually his anger is sparked by their lack of faith in him alone when they turn to other idols and gods of the land. In this instance, God redeems the Israelites for the first time. Enough time has passed to allow Jacob's descendants to become a substantial people, and God remembers his covenant. Yahweh acts to deliver those who suffer from years of pain and hardship, promising to "bring [his] people the Israelites, company by company, out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 7:4). In much of the Old Testament, with strong parallels to the basic stories of books like Judges, Amos, and Isaiah, God is enraged at Israel, punishes them, and then redeems them in a cyclical pattern. This suffering to redemption motif not only characterizes Exodus and the story of the Israelites, but also implies the ideal of helping the less fortunate (Coogan 82). Frequently, God behaves out of mercy to help those in need, but also encourages his people to do the same. This pattern of condemning and forgiving that frequents the Bible becomes a major idea in the overarching plot of the Old Testament and God's doctrine.

Examining the passage's wording in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and other versions, underlying significance comes to light. While the NRSV says that God will "harden Pharaoh's heart," the Revised English Bible (REB), the New American Bible (NAB), and the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) write that God will "make him stubborn," "make Pharaoh... obstinate," and "make Pharaoh stubborn," respectively (Exodus 7:3). Here, the NRSV alone paints the image of a "hardened" heart, a description that relates to courage. While it may seem that God resolves to make Pharaoh cruel, the

intention is to give him a courageous “heart” (will or understanding), one that remains unchanging (Propp 282). Either way, the text is clear: God directly interferes with Pharaoh’s will and prevents him from ending the plagues prematurely. Generally, the story in Exodus 7:1-12:36 is called “the plagues of Egypt”, though, ironically, the Hebrew word for “plague” is used sparingly, only 6 times throughout Exodus. More frequently called “signs”, “signs and wonders”, or “marvels” (10 times for “sign”, 7 times for “wonder”), the acts have a more positive depiction in the literal text (Kohlenberger). The NRSV and NAB use “signs and wonders,” the REB “sign after sign and portent after portent,” and the NJB “many a sign and wonder” (Exodus 7:3). Rather than harsh divine punishment, the words used to describe the events present a glorious spectacle created by God. The plagues should be revered, respected, and feared, rather than seen as gross cruelty on God’s part. Twice, God references “[laying his] hand upon Egypt” or “[stretching] out [his] hand against Egypt,” which carries multiple interpretations (Exodus 7:4-5). As the REB points out, this again expresses God’s desire to be known, as the two references translate here to “[asserting his] power” and “[exerting his] power against Egypt” (Exodus 7:4-5). Additionally, these references foreshadow the crossing of the Red Sea, as God extends his arm to part the sea and allow the Israelites to pass through (Propp 282). Though God’s “great acts of judgement” in Exodus 7:4 sound ominous, they do not signify punishment, but rather a challenge to the leadership of Egypt (Houston 73). These acts refer more to God’s designated purpose, proving his might, rather than divine redemption. The examination of wording here furthers the argument that the passage was written to emphasize God’s ultimate authority and power, rather than his devastating punishment of Egypt or the human effects.

Furthermore, historical details in the passage provide an idea of how the passage may have been interpreted thousands of years ago. The mandate claims that Moses has been “made... like God to Pharaoh” (Exodus 7:1). Ironically, Egyptian Pharaohs were considered god-kings, making Moses’ appearance as a deity mocking of Pharaoh’s position of power. In terms of Egypt’s religious views, ancient stories display how they also trusted in their gods to win over challengers and refused to bow

down to a different deity, especially one claimed by foreigners in their land, explaining the Pharaoh's hardened heart before God intentionally hardens it (Pritchard 20). However, although Moses is godlike to Pharaoh, he is still unfit to speak to him directly, and relies on his older brother Aaron to fill this role, implying several possible nuances. Firstly, P likely hopes to undermine Moses here, making him irrelevant, as an Israelite family at the time was attempting to claim lineage from Moses (Propp 285). By making Moses more like God's puppet, doubting his abilities and needing yet another instance of reassurance, P weakens his role and thus indirectly attacks the family. The brothers also represent the battle for the right to priesthood based on age, and break the firstborn tradition, a common motif in the Bible. Though Moses is younger (80 years old while Aaron is 83), he receives direct recognition from God. Their old ages convey the belief of the time that age brought wisdom (Houston 73). Particularly, Moses' age marks two-thirds of his life, as he lived to be 120 (Propp 285). Additionally, because the nation was enslaved when Moses was born, the ages emphasize how long Israel has suffered. While portraying Moses as God's tool, P glorifies the actions of the deity and his dominance above all people.

Though employing an omniscient perspective, the authors clearly have their own intentions and purposes behind every verse. Originally, the historical accuracy of Exodus was not questioned. Today, looking into historical context, the authors intended this text not as a reliable historical account, but as more of an imaginative piece meant to inspire pride and unify people under a common, all-powerful deity. Because of this, Exodus fails as an accurate text recounting details of real historical events, though it may contain truthful origins. The chronicle of the past and traditions of Yahwism likely originated as an oral history, developed over centuries before it was written down in prose. There is little evidence that the Israelites traveled from anywhere before they came to Canaan, that the plagues occurred, or of the existence of many geographical locations described in Exodus. Egyptian records lack any mention of the plagues, or of a group escaping (Pritchard). If they occurred, the actual plagues and the exodus from Egypt introduced in Exodus 7:1-7 would have taken place during the Late Bronze Age, between 1550 and

ca. 1209 BCE (Coogan 82). Recent research suggests that the plagues could have been caused by natural phenomena, either a chain of events caused by the Nile turning red, or a series of consequences from a volcanic eruption of the Santorini Volcano in the Aegean Sea in 15th century BCE (Lee). Though these explanations are plausible, the lack of Egyptian records pertaining to the plagues make the ten events unlikely to have happened at all. This is not to say that the escape from Egypt is entirely fabricated, however. Exodus places the capital of Egypt in the Nile River Delta, pointing to a specific time period and even a candidate for the identity of the Pharaoh. The capital of Egypt moved to the Delta from Thebes in the New Kingdom Age (1550-1069 BCE), while the Israelites worked as slaves in Pithom and Rameses, implying that the Pharaoh of oppression was Rameses II, a prominent leader who reigned for 66 years (Curtis and May 77). Typically, Egyptians held several Asiatic groups as military captives and slaves at that time, making the most plausible story that a small group of Asiatics escaped Egyptian servitude (Coogan 82). It is impossible to corroborate the historical story of Exodus today, though research permits an educated guess. Because of the miraculous nature of their freedom, the leader of this small group escaping Egypt may have attributed the event to divine causes, a story that later spread throughout Canaan and gave them a collective identity. While Exodus clearly exaggerates, making the literal history inaccurate, the story of the plagues continues to have great significance in regards to its meaning for Israel and the entire Bible.

As a whole, the story of the plagues serves as a major cornerstone in the history of Israel and the formation of the nation as an independent unit. While the historical evidence of the events at hand is virtually nonexistent, the story speaks volumes about the identity of Israel. God deliberately saves Israel for multiple reasons, justified by the authors to combine the causes into a set of identifying features of the nation. Also offering a guideline, the authors supplement ways in which the Israelites should behave in order to possibly better the predicament in which the nation was entailed at the time. The most obvious reason for God's intervention, as previously discussed and as he states himself, is to prove himself the

almighty Lord, who reigns over Egypt and Israel alike. The authors emphasize this multiple times in order to strongly encourage monotheism, citing that God refuses to tolerate the worship of idols or other gods. Exodus 7:1-7 shows P's complex understanding of the importance of God's actions, which are all about unification and following Yahweh alone (Childs 118). Secondly, the events in Genesis leading up to this designate another clear cause: to fulfill the covenant Yahweh made with both Abraham and Jacob to bless and provide for their numerous descendants. Although the Israelites have now become a people, God continues to follow his covenant long after the death of the "great" ancestors. Additionally, God brings Israel out of Egypt so that they may continue to worship him in the wilderness and on Mount Sinai (Muntingh 127). God's many motivations for redeeming Israel culminate a basis for the Israelite and Yahwist identity. The account is a backstory, explaining the traditions of Israel, their origins, and their unique relationship with God. According to the authors, Israel should be monotheistic, abandoning the popular religions of the groups around them, living modestly, trusting in God to relieve their oppression, and cognizant of the covenant of their ancestors that protects them. By following God's commandments and striving to live like Moses, Abraham, Jacob, and their ancestors, the authors stress that Israel could again be saved from exile and the threat of the Assyrians.

Although the plague story is unlikely to have occurred in reality, it is incorrect to assume that the chronicle has no historical or moral value. Exodus 7:1-7 introduces a story that continues to be referenced later in the Bible and provides a strong foundation in the relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites, with a middleman: Moses. The authors embedded this great significance with the intention of unifying Israel during a difficult period in the nation's history, hoping to boost morale and faith among the people. In order to achieve this goal, they continually emphasize the great might of God and his redeeming ability to turn Israel towards him. In current world religions, God's salvation of Israel appears as the idea of helping one's neighbor, trusting in God alone, keeping promises, and acting selflessly in order to be a better or more devout person. However, in the instance of the Assyrians, the authors' hopes for the

passage failed, as Israel was eventually destroyed, while Judah lived on. Nonetheless, the Bible and the book of Exodus influence the doctrines of major world religions today, displaying the universal ideas of helping those in need and having unwavering faith in a deity for deliverance.

Annotated bibliography

Berlin, A., and Grossman, M. "Plagues of Egypt." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, Oxford

University Press, 2011,

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199730049.001.0001/acref-9780199730049-e-2425>.

According to the dictionary entry "Plagues of Egypt", God hardens Pharaoh's heart to prove himself all-powerful, which God states in the biblical text. However, the dictionary adds that commentators have argued that leaving Pharaoh unpunished, even after he relents, would be a greater injustice than the extreme retribution that Egypt receives. Pharaoh was thought to have brought this upon himself by originally denying the Israelites their freedom, and his fate was greatly deserved.

Childs, Brevard S. "The Renewed Call of Moses: 6.2-7.7." *The Book of Exodus: a Critical, Theological Commentary*. Westminster Press, 1974, pp. 108-120.

This chapter defines the purpose of God's second call to Moses in 7:1-7 as introducing the plagues, but also as portraying the author's understanding of the event. The central focus is God's disclosure of himself and his desire to be known among the people, whose reactions play only a minor role. The commentary highlights the common theme of revelation by God, who chooses Moses (and his brother Aaron, the mouthpiece) to deliver his message and to help Yahweh make himself known to both the Israelites and the Egyptians.

Coogan, Michael D. "Exodus." *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha: an Ecumenical Study Bible*. 5th ed., Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 81-142.

The introduction to Exodus sheds light on the origin of the story, its historical accuracy, and why it is considered significant today. While the events of Exodus are historically implausible, the likely story is of a small group managing to escape Egyptian servitude, finding their redemption so incredible that it must be divine. This story spread throughout Canaan and was later recorded to provide hope to Judeans in exile, exaggerated through centuries of oral tradition, conveying the intense emotional experience of escaping slavery. The passage notes highlight the importance of the number ten, the phrasing of "signs and wonders," and the meaning of "know the Lord," among other things.

Curtis, Adrian, and May, Herbert G. "The Exodus and Wilderness Traditions." *Oxford Bible Atlas*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 77-82.

Exodus details how the Israelites were enslaved in the Goshen area in the Nile Delta, in the cities of Rameses and Pithom. Rameses is named after the Pharaoh Rameses II, and thus he is believed to be the pharaoh of the plague story. Additionally, the Nile runs by Rameses, making the first plague geographically accurate.

"Exodus." *The Complete Parallel Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version, Revised English Bible, New American Bible, New Jerusalem Bible*. Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 124-125.

Upon close examination of Exodus 7:1-7 in four different translations, certain wordings stand out in the text, especially in verse 3. The diction used to describe the Pharaoh's refusal to submit as

well as the plagues themselves vary greatly between versions. Additionally, the Revised English Bible places more emphasis on God proving his power in the land of Egypt. Such differences raise questions about the motivation and meaning behind the story.

Houston, Walter. "Exodus." *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, by John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 67-90.

Commentary on the book of Exodus as a whole designates the purpose of the work as a morale boost to Israel. At the time Exodus was written, Israel had fallen on exile, and the story became a significant unifying factor in the nation's identity and to serve as hope that God would deliver them. On the other hand, the account relays the glory of God's actions, with bountiful exaggerations employed by the authors. In passage-specific commentary, Exodus 7:1-7 repeats earlier promises made by God and reinforces Moses' mission to combat his insecurity. Yahweh makes it clear that he will prevail over Egypt and make both Israel and their oppressors know him in different ways.

Kohlenberger, John R. *The NRSV Concordance Unabridged: Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. Zondervan, 1991.

Examining the word "plague" in Exodus, it is found a mere 6 times in the book. Much more frequently is the use of the word "sign" or "wonder" to explain God's acts. Such a connotation paints the occurrences in a more positive light than violent punishments, seen as great acts of judgement rather than divine retribution.

Lee, Jeffrey A. "Explaining the plagues of Egypt: the ten plagues of Egypt, as told in the Book of Exodus, can be easily explained. Or maybe not...." *Skeptical Inquirer*, Nov.-Dec. 2004, p. 52+. *Gale*

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<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A124136344/EAIM?u=mnastolaf&sid=EAIM&xid=147cd5cf>.

Accessed 27 Oct. 2019.

The author, Jeffrey Lee, summarizes various theories, from scholars H. M. Duncan Hoyte, John S. Marr and Curtis D. Malloy, and Dorothy Vitaliano, about how the plagues of Egypt could have been caused naturally. Theories include that the plagues may have been a result of an eruption of Santorini Volcano in the Aegean Sea in fifteenth century B.C., or a chain reaction, with certain plagues setting off others. Lee's summary provides a variety of plausible natural reasons for the plagues, negating the idea that the disasters only could have originated from a greater power.

Muntingh, Lukas M. "Egypt as a Hermeneutical Principle in the Theology Behind the Plagues of Egypt."

Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika: Meeting 29. National Library of Israel, 1987, pp. 113-146.

The author uses his own arguments and evidence alongside a variety of other scholarly sources to break down and analyze the significance of Egypt in the plague narrative and its relationship with Israel. Additionally, Muntingh describes God's reasons for bringing the plagues upon Egypt and why the Israelites were excluded from the destruction. Overall, the author argues that the account should be seen as having theological value and function rather than historical accuracy, as it is the story of the Israelites beginning to connect with God as a people, essentially beginning Yahwism.

Powell, Mark Allan, and Bandstra, Barry L. "Plagues." *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. Rev. and updated 3rd ed., HarperOne, 2011, pp. 810-811.

The entry regarding plagues mentions the Exodus account and how plagues often go by other names, frequently "signs and wonders." The entry also briefly mentions how the priestly and

non-priestly sources interact in the Exodus story, changing the meaning of the work as a whole. Plagues are also found elsewhere in the Bible as a potential generic punishment for Israel's lack of faith. The purpose of the plagues story is to outline Israel's escape from Egypt and its resulting beliefs and traditions.

Pritchard, James B., editor. "Egyptian Myths, Tales, and Mortuary Texts." *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement*, by John A. Wilson, Princeton University Press, 1978, pp. 3–36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19wccw4.5.

This collection of Egyptian legends, stories, and other texts sheds light onto the customs and religion of the area. While there is no corroborating evidence of the plague, there is a story of the Nile being barren for seven years, which could be related. Additionally, stories of treatment of foreigners and their prophecies provide insight into how the Egyptians might have reacted to the Israelites' threats, painting a picture of their likely indifference and disbelief in the Yahwistic God.

Propp, William Henry. "I am Yahweh (6:2-7:7)." *Exodus 1-18: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. 1st ed., Doubleday, 1999, pp. 261-286.

This commentary explores the significance of specific wordings in the passage, especially regarding God's decision to "harden" Pharaoh's heart and to extend his arm over Egypt, as well as Aaron and Moses' ages. Additionally, the relationship between Aaron and Moses could possibly subtly convey the attitude of the author towards Moses. Irony also plays a role in regard to the brothers' positions as priests vs. their respective ages, as well as Moses' appearance as a god to the god-king, Pharaoh.

Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. "Egypt." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 2, Abingdon Press, 2007, pp. 206-226.

Providing a detailed outline of Egypt's traditions and history in relation to the Bible, this entry specifically points out the significance of the Bible's assumption that the royal residence would be found in the Delta, as it moved from Thebes during the New Kingdom period (1550-1069 BCE). The use of the word "pharaoh" is also notable, as it was not used in earlier Egyptian history. Due to the timing of the account, Ramesses II, who reigned for 66 years, is often considered the Pharaoh of Egypt in Exodus.

Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. "Plagues in Egypt." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. 4, Abingdon Press, 2007, pp. 534-536.

In addition to briefly discussing possible natural causes of the plagues and listing several words used instead of "plague", the entry "Plagues in Egypt" details attributions made to the priestly and non-priestly sources in the Exodus story. As the plagues are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, the story is commonly thought to have been compiled and embellished by the priestly source, giving the disasters a greater purpose: proving God's power and might, as well as focusing on Israel's freedom from Egypt. The non-priestly source is identified by its pattern in the story, and centers more on the origin of the Passover.