

EXODUS

From Slavery to Service

5. The Plagues
God's Battle with Pharaoh
(Exodus 5:1—10:29)

References

- **Exodus (from series Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)**
Terence E. Fretheim, Westminster / John Knox Press, 1991
- **From Slavery to Service: A Study of Exodus**, by Diane L. Jacobson, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1996 ISBN 0-8066-2978-9 (out of print)
- “The Book of Exodus. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” Walter Brueggemann. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994. ISBN 0-687-27814-7
- **The Book of Exodus**, by Brevard S. Childs, Westminster, 1974

Oppression Revisited (Exodus 5:1-6:1)

- Read the text
- Like Exodus 1:13-14 there is continuous repetition of words for service in 5:9-21
 - Whom will Israel serve?
 - Israel is to serve Yahweh (Ex. 4:23)
 - Pharaoh will later admit that this is correct (Ex. 12:31)

Oppression Revisited (Exodus 5:1-6:1)

- Pharaoh exemplifies systematic oppression
 - Overwork the oppressed so they are incapable of resistance
 - Crack down on the smallest sign of resistance
 - Blame the liberators for the crackdowns
 - System works so well that even in the wilderness, Israelites will long for Egypt (Ex. 14:12; 16:3)
 - Accuse the oppressed of laziness
 - The proliferation of the oppressed is a sign of their laziness
 - Productive capacity is more important than worship
 - Make production more difficult
 - Overwork the oppressed so they are incapable of resistance

Oppression Revisited (Exodus 5:1-6:1)

- Hebrew foremen blame their own leaders
- Pharaoh's response in Exodus 5:2 is similar to Moses' response to God's call
 - Pharaoh asks the right question; knowledge of God is the point (Ex. 9:14)
 - Pharaoh mocks the prophetic formula in 5:10, "Thus says Pharaoh"
 - Oppressed community is now divided

Oppression Revisited (Exodus 5:1-6:1)

- Moses blames God
 - Makes accusations of evil against both God and Pharaoh
 - Moses neglects his own role in adding to the suffering of his people
 - “This is ultimately a recognition that deliverance from evil may entail the experience of even more evil. Overcoming oppression is a matter for struggle, *even for God*. Evil will not give up without a fight.” Fretheim
 - Moses’ primary question is why to which God responds with assurance

Commission Reaffirmed (Ex. 6:2-7:7)

- P's account of Moses' call
- Reaffirmation of call
 - Moses needs to make explicit acceptance of call as well as reassurance
 - People's "broken spirit" reflects inability of those living under adverse conditions to hear God's word
 - Pharaoh will demonstrate need for "acts of judgement"
 - God needs to clarify to Moses that Pharaoh will not heed his pleas

Commission Reaffirmed (Ex. 6:2-7:7)

- Moses' objections
 - Read Ex. 6:29-7:5
 - Now Moses will be like God to Pharaoh
 - “Especially to be noted is how God gives up sole rights to the word ‘God,’ giving it to one who is not God. This is a striking form of *divine self-effacement*, in which the achievement of the divine purpose is allowed to be clothed in human form. God deigns to be embodied in Moses before Pharaoh. In and through what Moses says and does in what follows, God himself is present and active. In Moses, God’s work will be done.” (Fretheim)
- Genealogy

Commission Reaffirmed (Ex. 6:2-7:7)

- Gospel of the Exodus
 - Why does text say that God was not known before by his name
 - Probably a sign of new development in relationship
 - Covenant entails promise of land and God's own presence
 - Liberation from oppression
 - Knowledge of Yahweh
 - God will lead the people into the land
 - God will adopt them as his own people
 - God's message
 - Pharaoh must let God's people go
 - Egyptians will also come to know Yahweh is God

Commission Reaffirmed (Ex. 6:2-7:7)

- God's purpose clearly stated in Ex. 9:16
- “Even Egypt is opened up to the vista of new possibilities entailed in such a declaration (see Isa. 19:23-25). This means that, while the focus of the exodus is on the deliverance of Israel, its public character witnesses to God's creational purposes for the entire world. Israel's liberation moves toward the fulfillment of God's purposes in creation. God's activity on behalf of Israel is for the sake of the world!” (Fretheim)

Commission Reaffirmed (Ex. 6:2-7:7)

- “God will not be indifferent to evil. Acts of cruelty and ruthlessness, which bring people to the brink of despair, must be brought to justice and publicly exposed for what they are, so that the world will know that such anticreation deeds will not be tolerated. Indeed, unless there is judgment, the creation that God intends will be turned into chaos. For Egypt and others to know that Yahweh is God is to recognize that God will be about preserving the creation, of moving resolutely against all those who are antilife and antiblessing.” (Fretheim)
- Even Pharaoh's resistance will be used by God to bring freedom to the Israelites

Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

- Both God and Pharaoh spoken of as hardening the heart
 - Use of verb *kabed* for heavy
 - Connected also to glorifying God (Ex. 14:4)
- God's strength demonstrated in opposition to Pharaoh's strength
 - Use of verb *hazaq*
- Pharaoh hardens his heart in opposition to God's restoration of creation after several plagues (Ex. 8:15, 32; 9:34-35; 10:20)

Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

- When Pharaoh's servants' hearts are hardened, they are still open to arguing with Pharaoh to go in a different direction (Ex. 10:1)
- “Human patterns of thought and will may in time become irreversible through continual refusal to respond to God's word.” (Fretheim)
- Moses believes his lack of eloquence accounts for Pharaoh's refusal to the people go (Ex. 6:12) suggesting that it is still possible for Pharaoh to change direction

Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

- Like the prophets, Moses warns of a judgement that will at some point be inevitable without repentance
- Interaction between hardened hearts and choices is found in language about Israel as well (Ps. 81:11-12)
- Point of inevitability appears to be reached after 8th plague

Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

- “These events would not redound much to the glory of God if it were only a matter of God’s outwitting a windup toy... The reality of the conflict and the power of evil are important matters if the divine name to be declared is one that will in fact ‘get God honor and glory’ (14:4, 18) among the nations. God’s struggle with evil is real; God does not rid the world of evil with a flick of the wrist... The pharaohs of this world do not give up easily.” (Fretheim)

General Comments about the Plagues

- Plagues part of the theology of creation
- Injustice threatens not only moral order, but threatens creation itself
- Repetitive use of words for service, all (*kol*), and land (*`eres*) generate the effect of Pharaoh as a cosmic threat

General Comments about the Plagues

- Biblical text actually uses the words for sign and wonder instead of plague, linking them to the coming judgment at Passover &/or the Red Sea
- “*The deliverance of Israel is ultimately for the sake of the entire creation. The issue finally is not that God’s name be made known in Israel but that it be declared (*sapar*) to the entire earth (9:16)*” (Fretheim)
- Pharaoh’s actions have so threatened creation that natural forces such as water, light, darkness, diseases are distorted

General Comments about the Plagues

- Plague of darkness is actually a return to the state that existed prior to creation
- Non-human elements of creation suffer alongside humanity
- Pharaoh's actions and their consequences are in equitable balance with each other
 - Israel's oppression leads to extended series of plagues
 - Israel's losses of life, property, etc. are experienced by the Egyptians
 - Broken spirit of Israel is matched by hardening of Egyptians' hearts
 - Commanded death of Israelite babies is matched by the death of the firstborn of Egypt
 - Cosmic nature of plagues related to Pharaoh's opposition to creation

General Comments about the Plagues

- Biblical language for God's removal of plague is the language of re-creation

On Swallowing Rods and Egyptians

- Exodus 7:8-13
- Pharaoh gets the sign he asks for
- Magicians can only make things worse by making more trouble
- Aaron's rod swallowing the rods of the magicians points to the later swallowing of the Egyptians
 - Same verb is used in Ex. 15:12
 - Word for snake is different than word used in Ex. 4:3; *tannin* is a more terrifying creature
 - God causes Aaron's rod to swallow the chaos monster

Blood in the Water (Ex. 7:14-25)

- Both Aaron and God strike the water
- God works through Aaron giving this sign a sacramental character
- Magicians can duplicate this sign, almost
 - They seem to have natural water to work with
 - Fretheim suggests that God restores creation
 - Magicians cannot do that
- “Blood throughout all the land of Egypt” similar to the death of firstborn
- Sign opposes Pharaoh’s statement that he created the Nile (Ez. 29:3)

The Land Stank (Ex. 8:1-15)

- Frogs are everywhere
- Magicians can make even more frogs appear!
- Removing the frogs takes Moses' intervention with God; the magicians can't do this
- Stench of land points to widespread death of firstborn

From Dust to Dust (Ex. 8:16-19)

- Gnats first plague where there is no interaction between Moses and Pharaoh
- Possible reason is Pharaoh's deception
- Dust is the source and destiny of human life
- It's disappearance is bad sign for the Egyptians
- Magicians recognize they are out of their league; this is the "finger of God"

The Land is Ruined (Ex. 8:20-32)

- Plague of flies infests even the ground, an ominous sign
- Israel is excluded from the effects of this plague, as it will be from here on
- Purpose is “that you may know that I am the LORD within the earth/land” (Ex. 8:22)
- Points to passing over of the angel of death/ the destroyer
- Again Pharaoh asks Moses’ intervention
- God restores the natural order, but at the cost of judgment on the oppressor Egyptians

Whose Livestock Die? (Ex. 9:1-7)

- Israelite livestock excluded from this plague
- Use of *dabar* for the plague is linked to other judgments on Israel (Deut. 28:21) or other nations (Ez. 38:22)
- Why involve the animals?
- Human sin has effects on the rest of creation

Signs of Mortality (Ex. 9:8-12)

- Plague of boils painful reminder of human mortality
- Recalls sign of Moses' leprous hand
 - Leprosy connected with boils (Lev. 13:18-23)
- Use of ash recalls fire of judgment

A Sign from Heaven (Ex. 9:13-35)

- Hail and lightning continue cosmic theme of plagues
- Language of Ex. 9:14 can be translated as “I will send all my plagues [blows] upon your heart” (?)
- Effectively hardening the heart
- Pharaoh deserves death, but instead will be used to accomplish God’s purpose
 - To make God’s name known in all the earth (Ex. 9:14)
 - Means all people are God’s people
- Pharaoh warned to protect his livestock
 - Some Egyptians “feared the word of Yahweh”
- Hail associated with theophanies and judgment

Driven Into the Red Sea (Ex. 10:1-20)

- Pharaoh's heart hardened before the plague of locusts
- Purpose not only for Pharaoh and his servants, but so the Israelites can tell this story through the years
- Israel will know God
- Pharaoh is more recalcitrant than before
- Locusts a sign of judgment
- Locusts brought by the east wind and driven into Red Sea by the east wind
- East wind will make a path through the sea for the Israelites

A Return to the First Day of Creation

- Exodus 10:21-29
- Plague of darkness comes at God's direction, like third and sixth plague
- Not some natural phenomenon; the Israelites have light
- A return to primordial chaos
- Pharaoh willing to give in...on his conditions
- Coming disaster is now inevitable for the Egyptians