

The Ten Plagues, “Let My People Go”

The conflict between the LORD and Pharaoh begins with Moses and Aaron approaching the king of Egypt. This series of stories, which includes the well-known legend of the Ten Plagues, is framed as a contest story. A similar type of tale can be found in the Joseph narrative (Gen 41). In contest stories, the protagonist’s gift—interpreting dreams or performing miraculous signs—is challenged by other officials who have a similar skill. In the conclusion of these tales, the hero is vindicated, and his or her god is recognized as the true god. Though the contest in Exodus begins as a competition between Moses and Aaron with the sages and magicians of Egypt, the real battle is more cosmic—a clash between Pharaoh, the mighty king of Egypt, and the LORD, the God of the Israelites. In summary, the ten plagues are:

1. Water turned to blood (7:14-25)
2. Frogs (8:1-15)
3. Gnats (8:16-19)
4. Flies (8:20-32)
5. Livestock diseased (9:1-7)
6. Boils (9:8-12)
7. Hail (9:13-35)
8. Locusts (10:1-20)
9. Darkness (10:21-29)
10. Death of the firstborn (11:1–12:32)

The plague stories are repetitious and formulaic. They each begin with the LORD instructing Moses to provide Pharaoh with the threat of a disastrous event. After each disaster, Pharaoh eventually disregards the sign, i.e., he hardens his heart or his heart is hardened,

Lectionary Loop

**Maundy Thursday, Year A, B, C,
Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10), 11-14
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost,
Year A, Exodus 12:1-14**

even though at different points he shows signs of surrendering. When the plague has passed, however, the king of Egypt eventually returns to his initial position of refusing to let God's people go. Since this session covers a large section of the book, I will focus my attention on three important themes or events within this extended contest narrative: 1) the "knowledge of the LORD"; 2) the hardening of Pharaoh's heart; and 3) the Passover.

The Knowledge of the LORD

The first theme, "the knowledge of the LORD," reflects the divine purpose within the book of Exodus. It is a theme that is repeated many times but is most prominent in the story of the Ten Plagues and the deliverance at the sea in Exod 14–15. It usually takes a form similar to, "that [X] shall know that I am the LORD" (cf. 7:5, 17; 8:22; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 14:4, 18). Within the plague narratives and the Exodus journey itself, this theme serves as a reminder that the LORD's "signs" and "wonders" are not ends in themselves. Rather they serve a specific purpose in relation to Israel and those who would oppose God's will for the people. In the Hebrew Bible, signs and wonders point to God's activity and extraordinary intervention in the world. They are not intended to prove the LORD's existence but are signifiers of divine presence and activity in creation. Thus, the LORD's signs and wonders have the ability to produce a certain knowledge of God's ongoing presence among the people for those who have eyes to see. In the following scene, God's miraculous deliverance at the sea signifies the LORD's defeat of Pharaoh and his chariots, by which "the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD" (14:4).

Simultaneously, the Lord's mighty deeds, including God's humiliation of Pharaoh, serves as an indication to Israel and their descendents of what God has done in their midst (10:2). Hence, the knowledge of the Lord cuts both ways. It acts as a further verification of judgment for any empire that would oppose the divine will; and it serves as confirmation of God's faithful action on behalf of Israel that they might know the LORD.

Teaching Tips

1. Compare other retellings of the plague accounts with the stories in Exodus. See, for example, Pss 78 and 105. Note that the traditions do not agree on the order or number of plagues. This suggests that ten is not a reflection of the accurate number of plagues, but is an indication of the stylized nature of these stories. For a helpful chart and discussion of these variations, see Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986, p. 70.
2. You can begin the class by listening to or singing together the African American spiritual, "Go Down, Moses," which appears in many hymnals. It is a good way to set the mood for a session and to get the class reflecting on the tradition of liberation within the Hebrew Bible and beyond.

The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart

A corresponding theme to “the knowledge of the LORD” within the plague narratives is the perplexing notion of “the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.” This prominent motif is complex and reflects a larger tension between human initiative and divine will that is present throughout the book of Exodus. To what extent does God determine the actions of humanity? Similarly, how much free will do human beings have within God’s economy? The book of Exodus presents a different range of possible answers to these questions, but, ultimately, does not resolve the tension. Some texts declare that Pharaoh hardens his own heart in response to the LORD’s signs and wonders (8:15, 32; 9:34), suggesting that the king is willfully stubborn in his opposition. Other texts simply describe the state of the king’s heart as hardened (7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35). Finally, others state that the LORD is responsible for hardening Pharaoh’s heart, placing the reason for the king’s condition squarely within the divine will (7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10).

Theological difficulties result on either end of this unresolved tension. On the one hand, if Pharaoh can act autonomously from the divine will, openly defying God’s intention for Israel, how can the LORD be sovereign over all of the earth? On the other hand, if God determines the actions of Pharaoh, how can one hold the king of Egypt accountable for what he does? The beauty and complexity of the biblical text lies in the fact that this difficult theological dilemma is left unresolved. All of the options remain within this story. Pharaoh’s heart is hardened in the book of Exodus. This condition is both his own fault and God’s determined will.

The Passover

The tenth and final plague within this extended contest narrative combines the killing of Egypt’s firstborn with regulations for the celebration of the Passover festival. The Passover tradition, as it has been preserved in Exodus, includes explicit direction for the preparation and celebration of the feast (12:1-28). Instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread (12:14-

Reflections

1. What “signs” give us evidence of God’s presence in our midst?
2. How can we interpret the miraculous deeds in the Bible? Do we tend to rationalize them away? Do we seek scientific verification of them?
3. How can we interpret the LORD’s signs and wonders in our present context?

Reflections

1. Is the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart his own fault or God’s doing, or is it simply a condition that moves the story forward? What is at stake in each position?
2. How much does God give us free will? How much of our actions and lives are determined by a divine plan? Remembering that the biblical story is written from the perspective of God’s people (and not the Egyptians), what can this theme—the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart—teach us about our lives and about God’s will for our lives?

20; 13:3-10) and the consecration of Israel's firstborn (13:1-2, 11-16) are also presented. Hence, this passage combines what were originally two springtime festivals, one agricultural (unleavened bread) and one pastoral (the offering of a lamb). The festivals of the Passover and Unleavened Bread mark two key events within this section of Exodus. The former relates to the passing over of the LORD during the killing of Egypt's firstborn, and the latter to Israel's hasty flight from the land of Egypt. Thus, the celebration of the entire Passover event marks a transition point within the book of Exodus. It corresponds with the tenth and final plague that the LORD inflicts upon Egypt, ironically doing to the Egyptians what Pharaoh had originally decreed for the Israelites—the killing off of the male progeny. It also marks the initial flight of the Israelites from the land of Egypt. Hence, the exodus has begun, and the oppressive yolk of the Egyptians has been broken.

It is significant that this point in the narrative is marked with explicit direction for a festival to the LORD. The major climaxes for both the Ten Plagues story and the exodus (“the Song of the Sea”) end with liturgical celebrations. In other words, within the world of Exodus, the proper human response to God's mighty deeds is worship. Therefore, the LORD's initial rationale for allowing the people to go—that they might celebrate a festival to the LORD (5:1)—has been enacted in the narrative memory of Israel through the institution of the Passover. The LORD has freed Israel from its bondage in Egypt with signs and wonders, and Israel responds with worship and song. They are not delivered, however, for the purpose of unrestrained freedom—liberation for liberation's sake—but are freed so that they might worship the LORD unreservedly, serving the God who delivered them from oppression.

Study Bible

For a more thorough exposition of the Death of the Firstborn/Passover section (11:1–13:16), see *NISB*, 101-105.