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The Ten Plagues as Understood in Rabbinic Literature

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Digest

This thesis seeks to study midrashim related to the Ten Plagues. While there is a decent amount of rabbinic material in regard to this topic, it is seldom studied in a systematic fashion. Therefore, this work will set forth and analyze the major midrashim on the Ten Plagues in a thematic, as well as chronological, schema. Through examining the rabbinic sources in this way, we not only learn more about the rabbinic understanding of this episode in Israel's history, but we also better understand the Rabbis' theological attitudes regarding divine retribution.

This paper is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter focuses on the plagues as they appear in the biblical context. The chapter opens with a synopsis of the narrative, continues with a sampling of issues found in the account, and concludes with a discussion of the historicity of the plagues.

The next two chapters concentrate on two of the major themes of the Ten Plagues. Chapter Two presents the rabbinic attitude toward the plagues as a whole. This section studies the available material in order to understand the midrashim that explain the role of the plagues in the larger Exodus story. The third chapter deals with the Egyptians' culpability. In particular, this chapter tends to study the midrashim which depict Pharaoh as the epitome of evil.

The following four chapters present a study of the plagues as they are commonly organized. Chapter Four details the various ways that the Rabbis divided and grouped the plagues. Chapter Five presents the midrashim on the first triad (blood, frogs, gnats);

Chapter Six deals with the second triad (swarms, pestilence, boils); Chapter Seven studies the third triad (hail, locusts, darkness); and Chapter Eight concludes with the midrashic material regarding the ultimate plague (death of the first-born).

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Introduction

One of the highlights of the Passover Seder is the ritual surrounding the recitation of the Ten Plagues. Children, especially, seem to relish the rare, sanctioned opportunity to play with their food. As the Seder's host pronounces each plague, the guests around the table dip their pinkie fingers (or the stem of the spoons, for those of a daintier nature) into their wine cups and spill a droplet onto their plates. This custom is repeated for the stating of Rabbi Judah's acronym for the plagues, דצ"ך עד"ש בא"ב.

In his commentary on the Passover Haggadah, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin teaches, "This [ritual] symbolizes our sadness at the loss of human life – even that of our enemies."¹ Since wine is typically characterized as the Jewish symbol for joy, spilling some of its contents represent the diminishment of our happiness in memory of the suffering that the Egyptians encountered with each plague.

It is interesting that in the Haggadah, the Rabbis preface the recitation of the ten plagues with an alternative calculation of the plagues. Rather than counting the individual blows, the Rabbis note that the ten plagues can be discerned by studying the verse, "The Lord freed us from Egypt with a strong hand, with an outstretched arm, with great terror, with wonders, and with signs" (Deuteronomy 26:8):

*With a strong hand: two. With an outstretched arm: two. With great terror: two. With wonders: two. With signs: two. These are the ten plagues that the Holy One brought upon the Egyptians, and these are they: blood, frogs, gnats, swarms, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the slaying of the first-born.*²

¹ Shlomo Riskin, The Passover Haggadah with a Traditional and Contemporary Commentary (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1983), p. 90.

² Passover Haggadah: Deluxe Edition (Maxwell House Family of Coffees, 1997), pp. 18-20.

Clearly, the Haggadah demonstrates an ambivalent attitude regarding the Ten Plagues. On the one hand, they are depicted as serious and unfortunate blows, which calls for us to reduce our festive mood during the Seder. However, on the other hand, the Haggadah points out that the Ten Plagues comprise the way in which God was able to liberate our ancestors. By juxtaposing the plagues with the Deuteronomy text, the Rabbis teach that, when we talk about God's redemption of the Hebrews, we are indeed talking about the plagues. Thus, it seems that the plagues should be a source of further celebration upon recounting our exodus from Egypt.

Due to this dichotomous attitude toward the plagues, I am moved to pose the question: what did the Rabbis really feel about the Egyptians' suffering? How did they understand these plagues within the greater context of the Exodus narrative? After all, the biblical account of the Ten Plagues is a crucial component of the larger Exodus story. On a most basic level, this narrative provides the transition between the Israelites' era of enslavement and period of liberation. On a deeper level, this narrative touches upon a variety of themes that merit discussion. Issues such as divine pathos, retribution, and justifiable evil underlie the Ten Plagues story. Likewise, this biblical scenario raises questions concerning a universalistic outlook (i.e. all people are God's children) and, at the same time, a divinely sanctioned – even supported – rivalry between Israel and Egypt. Indeed, the Rabbis have much to say regarding these and other topics.

The following chapters of this thesis will explore the various midrashic sources on the Ten Plagues. By examining and analyzing the relevant portions of rabbinic works such as Exodus Rabbah, Pesikta deRav Kahana, Pesikta Rabbati, and the Tanhuma

literature, I will focus on the various textual and theological issues raised by the Ten Plagues narrative. By studying these and other compilations of rabbinic teachings, I hope to uncover a more profound understanding of the Ten Plagues, as well as the Rabbis who commented upon them.

I. A Biblical Overview of the Ten Plagues

The Ten Plagues as Presented in the Exodus Narrative

The Ten Plagues story occupies a crucial place in the Exodus narrative. Couched between accounts of slavery and redemption, the Plagues serve as a dramatic transition from a period of oppression to an era of liberation for the young Israelite nation.

The opening verses of the Exodus narrative draw a picture of a very fertile Israelite population within Egyptian territory. When "a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,"³ these Israelites found themselves in an extremely precarious situation. The monarch perceived them to be a threat to his national security, so he decided to "deal shrewdly with them."⁴ He therefore enslaved the Israelites and attempted to curtail the population through imposing the infanticide of male children.

It is against this backdrop that the character of Moses is introduced as the future liberator of the Israelite nation. God calls to Moses while he was tending his father-in-law's flock in the wilderness. There, God announces to Moses, "Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt."⁵ However, God warns Moses that this will not be an easy task. God warns, "Yet I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might. So I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon

³ Exodus 1:8.

⁴ Exodus 1:10.

⁵ Exodus 3:9-10.

them; after that he shall let you go.”⁶ Hence, the plagues are introduced as a means to convince Pharaoh to release the Israelite people to their rightful Sovereign. According to this passage, the plagues serve a dual role: a) to establish Moses as an authoritative representative of an authoritative deity, and b) to display God’s greater might over the Egyptian gods, including Pharaoh.

Moses, along with his brother Aaron who is to serve as his spokesperson, goes to Pharaoh to relate his divine message: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let My people go...”⁷ Pharaoh responds with a question: “Who is the Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go.”⁸ Despite the brothers’ description of the Lord as the rightful God of the Hebrews, Pharaoh refuses to release the Israelites. On the contrary, Pharaoh increases the burdens on the people out of anger at the demand to worship their God. Moses and Aaron do not yet unleash the divine plagues on the Egyptians, but rather return to God to get further instruction. Through prolonging the onset of the plagues, the biblical narrative not only builds suspense, but also further sets the stage and provides convincing justification for the use of the plagues as a means of demonstrating God’s might and right to the Israelite population, as opposed to Pharaoh’s claim to them as slaves.

After this initial encounter with Pharaoh, God elaborates somewhat on the strategy toward liberating the Israelites. Moses is told, “You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply My signs and

⁶ Exodus 3:19-20.

⁷ Exodus 5:1.

⁸ Exodus 5:2.

marvels in the land of Egypt.”⁹ This statement introduces a new element in the narrative: God’s manipulating Pharaoh’s will. The motivation behind this appears to be so that “the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst.”¹⁰ This statement implies that in addition to the two previously stated functions, the plagues served yet another purpose, namely, to teach the Egyptians that the Hebrew God is the supreme, if not sole, deity of the universe. Moreover, hardening Pharaoh’s heart increases the stakes, so to speak. By impeding Pharaoh’s willingness to release the Israelites, God ensures that there will be a clear struggle of wills. Hence, God can further display the divine victory over the very mortal Pharaoh.¹¹

After receiving their divine marching orders, Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh to demand once more the release of the Israelite people. However, this time they do not employ words alone. Rather, the brothers attempt to give proof of God’s divinity. Aaron throws his rod to the ground, whereupon it turns into a serpent. Yet, Pharaoh is not impressed; he calls his magicians to perform the same wonder, which they do. Even when Aaron’s rod swallows up the other rods, Pharaoh remains unmoved: “Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said.”¹²

This is the last encounter between Moses and Pharaoh where the wonder performed inflicts no physical pain on the Egyptians or their property (except for the loss of the magicians’ rods that were swallowed by Aaron’s). After this scene with Pharaoh and the magicians, the ensuing demands for the Israelites’ release are accompanied by the

⁹ Exodus 7: 2-3.

¹⁰ Exodus 7:5.

¹¹ Brevard Childs, The Book of Exodus (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 173.

plagues. According to the Exodus narrative, there are ten plagues in all: 1) דם – blood, 2) צפרדעים – frogs, 3) כנב – lice (also interpreted as flies and gnats), 4) ערב – swarms of insects (also translated as wild beasts), 5) דבר – pestilence, 6) שחין – boils, 7) ברד – hail, 8) ארבה – locusts, 9) חשך – darkness, and 10) מכת כל בכור – the slaying of the first-born. During several of these plagues, Pharaoh pledges to release the Israelites if Moses will call off the divine punishment. However, it is not until the final plague that Pharaoh does not retract his promise.¹³

Observations on the Ten Plagues Text

Various biblical scholars have studied the passages dealing with the Ten Plagues. In doing so, several basic themes, motifs, and patterns have been pointed out concerning this text.

The first theme of note is the increasing severity and intensity of the plagues. Moshe Greenberg remarks, “Early readers noted the gradual escalation of severity in the plagues beginning with nuisances and pests, passing through destruction of livestock and crops, and ending (in the first-born plague) with the death of human beings.”¹⁴

While the first plague is bothersome to the Egyptians, it has little effect on Pharaoh since it does not affect him directly. As Greenberg writes, “During the blood plague, Pharaoh had a place to escape from Moses and the plague: he had merely to turn from the Nile and enter his palace to put the plague out of mind (for while his subjects

¹² Exodus 7:13.

¹³ Indeed, even after Pharaoh allows the Israelites to leave Egypt, he again changes his mind. Some say that the Egyptians' pursuit of the Israelites is the motive for the final “sign”: the splitting of the sea.

had to dig around the Nile, he of course did not).¹⁵ Due to this convenient escape from the repercussions of this miracle, some interpreters have held that the transformation of water into blood does not qualify as a plague. Rather, it should be understood as another sign, or wonder.¹⁶

The second plague, however, affected Pharaoh in addition to the Egyptians. Therefore, there is no question as to the appropriateness of labeling the frogs as a plague. Although the appearance of frogs may seem like a relatively harmless occurrence, a careful reading of the text reveals the seriousness of this plague. Pixley notes, "It might be thought that the multiplication of the frogs would not be as threatening as the contamination of the water. But the foregoing account did not treat the bloody water as a plague, and allowed the pharaoh to return home unconcerned."¹⁷ However, Pixley points out that the Hebrew word נָגַף, "to strike," occurs for the first time describing the frogs' impending arrival. The author further muses, "Perhaps this wonder is a more serious blow than then one preceding it because the frogs actually approach the king's bed."¹⁸ Clearly, according to this reading of the text, the frogs present a more immediate threat to Pharaoh than the blood.

The third plague is unique in that it marks the first time that Pharaoh's magicians are unable to duplicate the wonder associated with it, namely the presence of lice or gnats. This is crucial to the development of the story, since it reveals God's supreme ability. Therefore, the Egyptians realize that they are not dealing with mere

¹⁴ Moshe Greenberg, Understanding Exodus (New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1969), p. 170.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁶ George V. Pixley, On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 45.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Hebrew magicians; rather, they are dealing with a Divine Being. Greenberg notes, "Whereas formerly they (the magicians) were at least able to produce, if not to remove the plague, this time they cannot even produce it. They admit that this plague is divinely sent, and is no work of magic of which they are masters."¹⁹ Another way in which this plague is more severe than the preceding ones is that it affects every living body in Egypt. Fox comments, "With the third plague, the curse becomes more intimate, affecting the bodies of all living creatures in Egypt."²⁰

The fourth plague introduces a new aspect of the narrative: for the first time, Moses announces exactly when the "*Arob*" will appear. In doing so, Moses reinforces the fact that it is God who is performing the wonder in an intentional manner. It also establishes Moses as the valid spokesman for God, in that this mortal knows when the Divine will cause the plagues to occur. Greenberg elaborates, "Thus step by step the narrative builds up the overwhelming evidence of God's power and control over events."²¹

The fifth and sixth plagues share the common feature of affecting living bodies. Some may think that the fifth plague – the deadly pestilence that kills all of the Egyptian animals – would be more severe than the boils. After all, Sarna notes that pestilence "was one of the most dreaded and most widespread scourges to ravish civilization until fairly recently." However, in his JPS Commentary on Exodus, Sarna comments that with the boils, "[t]he plagues become more intense. For the first time one of the plagues

¹⁹ Greenberg, Understanding Exodus, p. 156.

²⁰ Everett Fox, Now These are the Names: A New English Rendition of the Book of Exodus (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 49.

²¹ Greenberg, Understanding Exodus, p. 158.

directly imperils human life.”²² Whereas the preceding plagues were manifested as a manipulation of nature or animal life, now God is directly affecting the physical well-being of Egyptian lives.

The seventh plague intensifies the scope of the horror-inducing effect of the plagues. Fox comments, “The description of the plague itself is fraught with spectacle...”²³ and Sarna observes, “The escalation in terror and ruin sets the stage for the climactic catastrophe.”²⁴ The very text that signals the onset of this plague reveals its severe nature: “an exceedingly heavy hail, the like of which has never been in Egypt from the days of its founding until now!” Many of the Egyptians are so frightened at the thought of this plague that they heed God’s advice to bring their livestock into safety, lest “the hail will come down upon them and they will die!”²⁵

Though the eighth plague does not threaten to cause any person or animal to die, it is viewed as more severe than the prior plagues. Locusts were known to be “one of the worst scourges to afflict humanity. An area of one square kilometer can contain fifty million such insects, which in a single night can devour as much as one hundred thousand tons of vegetation.” In that this plague is the longest in duration, one can imagine the damage that the locusts cause.²⁶ Perhaps this is why Fox describes the plague of locusts as “the most devastating of all, affecting as it does the very soil itself.”²⁷ The severity of

²² Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), p. 45.

²³ Fox, Now These are the Names, p. 53.

²⁴ Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, p. 46.

²⁵ Fox, Now These are the Names, p. 54.

²⁶ Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, p. 48.

²⁷ Fox, Now These are the Names, p. 57.

this plague is also attested to by the fact that several of Pharaoh's courtiers now urge him to release the Israelites. This is altogether a new development.²⁸

The last two plagues – darkness and the slaying of the first-born sons – comprise the climactic components of the narrative. Rabbi Levi b. Gerson (Gersonides) describes the darkness as “a plague that grievously afflicted their persons just short of death – the darkness that kept them three days immobile and unseeing – not even a candle could give light due to the dense black envelope – so they couldn't get their food those three days.”²⁹ The only thing worse than this near-death experience is death itself. Hence, the final plague – the death of the first-born sons.

Another motif that biblical scholars have identified in the plague narrative concerns the groupings of the plagues. When carefully studied, it becomes clear that there are three sets of three plagues, with the tenth plague serving as the final, climactic moment. Therefore, the first nine plagues are presented as 1) blood, frogs, lice, 2) insects, pestilence, boils, and 3) hail, locusts, darkness.

There is evidence that supports this grouping of the plagues in the way each of the plagues begins. The first two plagues of each set are preceded by a warning. However, the third plague is brought on without any indication to Pharaoh of what is to come. Furthermore, the phrasing used in the warnings is very specific. Moses is commanded to “station yourself” in order to deliver the warning for the first plagues of each set, but is told to “Go to Pharaoh” before the second plagues.³⁰

²⁸ Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, p. 54.

²⁹ Cited by Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, p. 171.

³⁰ Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, p. 77.

This structure of threes is helpful in understanding the division of labor among Moses, Aaron, and God. While there is no doubt that God is the ultimate cause of the plagues, all three parties share the responsibility of starting the individual plagues. In the first triad, Moses is the one who calls for the plagues to begin, yet it is Aaron who actually causes the water to turn to blood, the frogs to take over the land, and the lice to torment the Egyptians. It is interesting to note that the magicians can also perform these wonders, albeit to a much lesser extent. The third triad is brought on solely by Moses. Not only does Moses announce the hail, locusts, and darkness, but he also induces these three phenomena. It is not so easy to point to an agent who controls the second triad's plagues. Indeed, God directly brings on the insects and pestilence, but both Aaron and Moses cause the boils to afflict the Egyptians. The fact that the second triad does not neatly fit into the triadic structure might suggest that the pattern-theory is seriously flawed. However, Greenberg maintains, "[T]he thematic aptness of the choice of inducers in the first and third triplets leads one to inquire whether some reason may not underlie the choice in the second triplet as well."³¹

A third theme that scholars distinguish in this narrative is the use of the plagues as a means of asserting God's identity as the rightful Master of the world. According to the text, God needs to make sure that the people – both Israelites and Egyptians – recognize that He is the true Divine Being.³² This was accomplished by sending forth plagues that could have only been performed by the Eternal God.

³¹ Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, p. 173.

³² Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), pp. 69-70.

Several biblical scholars maintain that the plagues were sent in order to disprove the power and presence of the Egyptian gods. Sarna recognizes a theme in the Torah that points to this reading of the text. In particular, he notes that Exodus 12:12 ("I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord") and Numbers 33:4 ("the Lord executed judgment on their gods.") indicates that God used the plagues against the Egyptian deities. Sarna claims that the first two plagues centered on the Nile River. He views this as an affront to the Nile god Hapi and Osiris, a chief Egyptian god. The frogs could be another possible attack against Egyptian theology. Heqt, who was the frog goddess, was an important deity in that she was perceived as helping women in labor. In addition to these examples, Sarna notes that the sun god, Re, was also a target of divine wrath. The plague of darkness is read as a direct challenge to Re's ability to control his realm.³³ In his analysis of the plagues, Hoffmeier adds that some have interpreted the pestilence as an attack on Hathor and Apis, gods who were associated with cows and bulls. Despite these connections, however, Hoffmeier is not convinced that the plagues were primarily a means to demonstrate God's power over these Egyptian deities. Rather, Hoffmeier believes that the plagues were aimed at a particular Egyptian god-figure: Pharaoh.³⁴

What makes Pharaoh such a seemingly formidable roadblock to Israel's freedom is his complete sense of sovereignty. There is little question that the Egyptians viewed Pharaoh as a god. Sarna notes, "The theology and political theory of ancient Egypt stressed the literal divinity of the living pharaoh. His will was law, his word absolute."³⁵

³³ Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, p. 79.

³⁴ James K. Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 150-151.

³⁵ Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus, p. 65.

Hence, Pharaoh ruled in a society that granted him status as the sole authority and power figure. Greenberg describes the situation:

Pharaoh's position rests on his command of all the power in Egypt. His word is law and is executed by a well organized bureaucracy... His arm reaches everywhere in Egypt; there is refuge from him only in flight. Even supermundane forces are at his disposal in the expertise of his magicians. The heathen monarch is thus portrayed as entirely self-contained and self-confident, as the fountainhead of power, the director of his people's destiny who commands the obedience of his subjects even to criminal policies, if they are represented as in the national interest. He has no consciousness of mundane or supermundane checks on the free exercise of his authority.³⁶

Pharaoh's attitudes and actions reflect his belief that he is the supreme ruler over the land. This behavior results in the quiet acquiescence on the part of society at large. In redeeming the Israelites, God has to counter this conception of Pharaoh. Therefore, the plagues are enacted in wondrous ways that would undermine Pharaoh's authority while demonstrating God's real power.

Finding the Plagues in History

The biblical account of the plagues points to very miraculous events. As discussed above, God asserts Himself through bringing about the various wonders upon the Egyptians. Despite the text's attempt to demonstrate that only the true God of the Israelites could have accomplished such a feat, there have been scholars who believe that the plagues were due to natural causes.³⁷

William H. Stiebing, Jr. theorizes that the plagues resulted from a major volcanic eruption. During the sixteenth century BCE, the volcanic island of Thera experienced a

³⁶ Greenberg, Understanding Exodus, p. 178.

fatal eruption. Some believe that the fallout from this natural disaster was manifested in plague-like phenomena. For example, following recent eruptions of Thera, the water of the area has turned a reddish-brown color. Many underwater animals have also died as a result of volcanic emissions. Therefore, it has been suggested that the "bloody" waters could have very well been volcano-contaminated waters. It is also possible that the pink ash of Thera was carried to the Nile, resulting in a bloody appearance. Stiebing also notes, "Livestock could have been smothered by heavy clouds of volcanic ash or died of starvation when most of the vegetation was destroyed. And volcanic ash has been known to produce skin irritation. In fact, the Bible specifically credits the outbreak of boils and sores to 'fine dust' spread over the entire land." The darkness in the middle of the day can likewise be attributed to the darkness induced by volcanic ash-clouds. Insects have also been known to swarm around areas that had survived severe eruptions. Furthermore, lightning and hail are common features of volcanic activity, due to "a build-up of static electricity in the ash clouds and to steam and ash being ejected high into the atmosphere." Even the most supernatural of the plagues – the death of the first-born sons – can be related to Thera. Stiebing suggests that the Egyptians could have interpreted the eruption as a sign of the gods' anger toward them. To appease the gods, sacrifices might have been performed. He writes, "The scale of these disasters might have impelled these people to seek something more drastic than the usual animal sacrifices to propitiate the gods; nothing less than each family's first-born son would do."³⁸

³⁷ It should be noted that this attitude toward the Exodus account is a misconstrual of the text, which is better understood as a mythic narrative rather than an historical record.

³⁸ Cited by William H. Stiebing, Jr., Out of the Desert: Archaeology and the Exodus/Conquest Narratives (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), pp. 104-105.

Though Stiebing is intrigued by this volcano theory, he ultimately rejects it as the true story of the plagues. He notes that the evidence at hand reveals that "it is extremely unlikely that Thera's eruption could have affected Egypt the way this theory says it did." Science shows that the ash-fall of the volcano did move in the direction of Egypt, but very little actually fell on the country. The volcanic activity was too far away to have the intense effects that the Exodus story reports.³⁹

Greta Hort has also attempted to explain the plagues in natural terms. According to Hort, the plagues were a result of an unusually high Nile. Hort notes that when the Nile rises (sometime in July and August), it appears to be of a reddish tint. This is because there are soil particles floating on the top of the water's surface. At the time of the Israelites' struggle to become emancipated, Hort believes that there were millions of flagellates contaminating the Nile. This would account for the redder-than-usual appearance of the river. This would also explain why the fish died, why the water was not potable, and why there was such a foul stench in the land.⁴⁰

Hort traces the following five plagues back to the flagellates in the Nile. The frogs, which were known to "invade the land" when the Nile receded to its normal state, could have very well died due to the contamination of the dying, rotting fish. The insects, identified as a certain type of mosquito, were also a common occurrence during the Nile's flood season. Hort views these mosquitoes as related to the flies ("arob") in the following plague. She furthermore suggests that these flies bit the Egyptians, thus

³⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴⁰ Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition, p. 146.

causing the sixth plague: boils. Hort accredits the pestilence to anthrax, a disease spread by the frogs.⁴¹

The last four plagues are not connected to the Nile, according to Hort. Nonetheless, they can be seen as natural events. Hailstorms were rare in Egypt, but they did occur. Also, locusts were known to be a common nuisance to the region. Likewise, the thick darkness can be understood as a description of the khamsins – sandstorms – which are common in the Middle East. Despite her efforts, Hort could not attribute the tenth plague to any scientific or naturalistic cause.⁴²

This theory is much more popular than the volcano theory, and has enjoyed relative success among some scholars. As Pixley remarked, "...Greta Hort has so forcefully shown... the actual content of the plagues reflects events that could well have occurred in Egypt... We may well imagine, then, that some of the plagues described in the book of Exodus did coincide with the Hebrews' struggle for liberation, and were considered by Levite people and court alike, to be evidence of the intervention of Yahweh."⁴³

Arguments against Historical Readings of the Plagues

Despite the popularity of Hort's findings, many scholars do not agree with her theory on the plagues. Such scholars maintain that it is impossible to understand the plague story as it is literally presented in Exodus. Due to the literary structure of the narrative, one can see traces of variant sources. This suggests that the present account of

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 146-147.

the plagues is really a conglomeration of differing accounts. Therefore, an interdependent relationship among the various plagues is rendered invalid.

As Davies notes, the plague narrative in the Torah seems to be a very smooth story. She writes that "in their present form the stories project themselves as a series of very realistic scenes all closely belonging to each other." However, Davies maintains that it is possible to trace the accounts of the various plagues to different literary sources. Using the source-criticism method, the author presents an analysis of the plagues that separates the text into J, P, and E traditions.⁴⁴

Dozeman, too, studies the plague narrative through source-criticism. In doing so, he identifies different themes in the Exodus story that are revealed by the various traditions. He identifies six plagues as remnants of a J/JE source: blood, frogs, flies, cattle, hail, and locusts. These plagues serve to demonstrate the "kingship" of God. Through them, God is able to demonstrate His force to the Egyptians.⁴⁵ Dozeman finds traces of the P source in three wonders: snakes, gnats, boils. The P source is primarily concerned with Aaron's role. He is able to induce the signs and plagues with his staff in a way that is so miraculous that the Egyptian magicians are incapable of reproducing the wonders.⁴⁶ Finally, Dozeman identifies a third source as the Deuteronomistic redactor. This source is credited for the verses that emphasize the Israelites' need to worship in the wilderness.⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid., pp. 147-148.

⁴³ Cited by Pixley, On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective, p. 42.

⁴⁴ G. Henton Davies, Exodus (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1967), p. 90.

⁴⁵ Thomas B. Dozeman, God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

Pixley also considers the possibility that the plagues narrative was not originally a unified text. However, he understands the story as being comprised of two sources: J and P. While he recognizes that there are some scholars who argue for an E source, he maintains that the text does not provide clear enough evidence to merit this hypothesis. He writes, "Some exegetes, in view of the common variants between the two accounts of the plagues of hail, locust, and darkness, suggest that we are dealing with a third form in these cases, and that this part of the account is Elohist. If so, this third form lacks clarity."⁴⁸ According to the J source, the main focus of the story is the struggle to liberate Israel. Warnings are essential in this form, since the plagues were understood as threats to Pharaoh in order to scare him into releasing the Hebrew slaves. Moses was the key character in achieving the Israelites' redemption as the divine messenger. In the P tradition, Aaron was a much more significant persona. Similar to the J source, God would instruct Moses about the ensuing plagues, but Aaron was the person to execute them. Sometimes the Egyptian magicians would try to emulate the wonders, but they were never able to truly duplicate the plagues. It is interesting to note that according to this tradition, Pharaoh was unmoved by the plagues since God had hardened the monarch's heart.⁴⁹

Sarna also maintains that there are several origins for the plague story. However, he does not find the evidence within the Exodus text itself. Rather, he points to the versions of the plague narrative in Psalms. Psalm 78:42-51 recalls the liberation from Egypt. This psalm mentions seven plagues: blood, insects, frogs, locusts, hail, pestilence affecting livestock, and pestilence affecting first-born sons. Psalm 105:28-36 also

⁴⁸ Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, p. 40.

presents seven plagues. However, these seven are different from the ones found in the previous psalm: darkness, blood, frogs, insects and lice, hail, locusts, and the death of the first-born sons. Sarna writes, "It will be seen at once that these passages differ from the account in the Book of Exodus and from each other in the number and order of the plagues, and to a certain extent, also in their content." Hence, he concludes, "It is clear that multiple traditions concerning the plagues circulated in ancient Israel... To base a theory on only one of these traditions invites hesitation about the validity of its application."⁵⁰

Despite these arguments against the historical veracity of the plagues account, some scholars remain loyal to Hort's theory. For example, Hoffmeier makes allusion to source-criticism theory. Yet, he is unsatisfied with its findings. Because there is such a variety of interpretations regarding the sources, Hoffmeier maintains that it is misguided to read the plague narrative as a composite of JEPD. Rather, he seeks to understand the text as a unified composition. Hoffmeier also acknowledges the two other accounts of the plagues in Psalms. However, he does not think that the variance in the texts legitimates an unraveling of the story. Instead, he believes that the psalms' portrayals of the plagues were presented in a way to dramatize the effects of the wonders. He comments, "Because of the liturgical and didactic nature of the plague stories in the Psalter, they should not be used to reconstruct the sequence in Exodus, nor can they be used to isolate sources behind the Pentateuch."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Nahum Sarna, Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 74-75.

⁵¹ Hoffmeier, Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition, p. 145.

Conclusion

It is clear from reviewing the scholarship on the plagues that there is much debate surrounding this text. Is it historically accurate or is it completely myth and legend? Perhaps Greenberg answers this question most conclusively. He concludes, "The reality that the tale intends to convey is not past historical but present affective: the experience of events as they were taken in first by eyewitnesses, then through the consciousness of the generations who perennially relived and reflected on them as the basis of their own living faith."⁵² In the end, it does not matter whether the plagues occurred the way they are reported in the text. What does matter is that they are in the text for future generations to ponder. This is exactly what the Rabbis sought to do. In interpreting the plague narrative, they endeavored to learn what the wonders reveal about the nature of the Divine. Rather than focusing on proving the historical veracity of the plagues, the Rabbis strove to articulate and demonstrate the theological truths behind them.

⁵² Greenberg, Understanding Exodus, p. 204.

II. Motivating Factors for the Plagues

In discussing the ten plagues, one major area of concern for the Rabbis was the role that they played in the context of the Exodus narrative of the deliverance from Egypt. The Rabbis sought to understand the function of the plagues – as a whole, as well as individually. The Rabbis wanted to know why God employed these ten afflictions in particular. They sought to understand what these plagues reveal about the nature of God's conflict with Pharaoh and the Egyptians and how divine justice is executed.

One explanation for the plagues is found in Exodus Rabbah.⁵³ The midrash employs a parable to provide insight regarding God's use of the plagues. In the narrative, the Rabbis compare Pharaoh to a thieving swineherd, Israel to a ewe-lamb, and God to the rightful owner.

The parable relates the story of a swineherd who found a ewe-lamb and kept it with his other swine. When the owner came to retrieve his stolen lamb, the swineherd denied having her. In order to force the swineherd to surrender the lamb, the owner stopped up the sources used to water the swine. Still, the thief denied having the lamb. The owner then destroyed the swineherd's animal shelters. Again, he denied having the lamb. The owner then burned the swineherd's grass, making it impossible for him to feed his swine. The swineherd remained stubborn. Finally, the owner discovered where the swineherd's son attended school and abducted the boy. When the owner demanded his ewe-lamb from the swineherd, he received her. However, this is not the end of the story. He then seized the swineherd and demanded all that the lamb had produced in the

time she had been in the swineherd's possession. The swineherd then cried out, "Would that I had not given her back at all..."

This tale explains God's use of the plagues to convince Pharaoh to return Israel to her proper Master. First God sent Moses to ask for Israel's release. When this proved unsuccessful, God inflicted Pharaoh with the plagues of blood (to cut off the Nile's flow), hail (to destroy the fields), locusts (to consume the vegetation), and finally the slaying of the first-born sons. Finally, Pharaoh released the Israelites. However, God was not satisfied with this alone. Rather, God pursued Pharaoh and drowned him in the Sea of Reeds. The midrash states that Pharaoh began to cry, "Would that I had not released them!" Hence, the metaphor employed by this midrash is one of property ownership.

This midrash is significant in that it clearly portrays Pharaoh as a common thief. Israel was not his to take. Rather, Israel belonged to God. Pharaoh's refusal to return this nation to its proper owner called for the onset of the plagues. With every subsequent denial, Pharaoh's punishment grew in severity. Finally, Pharaoh was pushed to surrender to God. However, because he had been so malicious and cunning, liberating Israel did not absolve Pharaoh from personal consequences. Indeed, according to this midrash, justice was not served until Pharaoh drowned.⁵⁴

Other midrashim compare God to a flesh-and-blood king in need of controlling a rebellious state. The plagues, therefore, mirror a military strategy that would be used in order to quell the revolt and return order to the kingdom. Such a view is found in the

⁵³ Beshallah 20:1.

⁵⁴ The Exodus narrative does not state that Pharaoh drowned in the Seas of Reeds. Rather, the rabbis derive this from Psalm 136:15.

Midrash Tanhuma.⁵⁵ According to this tradition, God reacted to Pharaoh's obstinacy just as a mortal king would react to an unruly province. Each plague is compared to a tactic that would be used in a grand military strategy. Hence, the plagues grow in intensity, reflecting the increasingly severe measures that a flesh-and-blood king would employ in order to control a rebellious province.

The midrash states:

At first, he shuts up their water source. If they repent, good. If they do not, he brings קלאנים ("voices" such as loud war cries) against them. If they repent, good. If they do not, he slings arrows down upon them. If they repent, good. If not, he brings barbarians against them. If they repent, good. If they do not, he brings דורמוסיות ("a very heavy plague") upon them. If they repent, good. If not, he throws hot pitch on them. If they repent, good. If not, he catapults stones on them. If they repent, good. If not, he sends in a great population against them. If they repent, fine. If not, he imprisons them in jail. If they repent, fine. If not, he kills their great ones.

It is interesting that in this scenario, the rebellious citizens are given an opportunity to repent after each measure. The repetitive use of the phrase "חזרו מוטב," ... יאם לאו" indicates the urgent desire that the state would return to the king's law so that further repercussions would not be necessary. The image that is presented in this midrash is not one of war, in which two powers fight each other until one bests the other. Rather, the midrash relates a situation in which the stronger party attempts to thwart disobedience through a gradual and incremental response. The early measures, such as cutting off the water supply and sounding war cries, are not very violent actions. However, when the state does not surrender, the king does not hesitate to take more severe steps, such as

⁵⁵ Bo 4 and Tanhuma Buber, Bo 4.

hurling arrows, hot pitch, and stones – as well as sending various troops into the province.

After relating the mortal king's reaction to a rebellious state, the midrash presents God's use of the plagues as a divine version of this strategy. First, God shuts up the water sources by turning the Nile's water into blood. Then, God afflicts the Egyptians with the war cries of the croaking frogs. God sends gnats against the Egyptians just as a mortal king would use arrows. The midrash elaborates, "they entered into the Egyptians' bodies like arrows." Next, God sends barbarians against Egypt in the form of the wild beasts. When this fails to cause the Egyptians to repent, God further afflicts this rebellious state with a heavy plague: the murrain that kills the cattle. The Egyptians remain unmoved, so God torments them with boils that resemble hot pitch. In God's strategy, the hail serves the same purpose as the catapulted stones, and the locusts stand for the great population that was sent to invade the land. God then imprisons the Egyptians with a heavy darkness. Finally, as a last resort, God kills the "great ones": the first-born.

The parallels between the mortal king's strategy and God's plagues are constructed to demonstrate the political/militaristic nature of God's struggle with Pharaoh. The Rabbis brilliantly draw connections between common military measures and divine retribution. By relating the plagues in such a manner, the Rabbis not only compare the plagues to tactics, but also compare God to the ruling king. This reveals a very universalistic view of God's authority. Even though the Egyptians did not know God as such, they were still subject to the divine system. When God demanded

obedience, Pharaoh refused. Thus, according to the midrash, God was more than justified in executing the plagues against Egypt in order to bring about compliance.

In both scenarios, the measures against the rebellious states increase in intensity. However, the gradual nature of the plagues' intensification is even more apparent than that of the mortal king's strategies. Taking human life is used exclusively as a last resort in the plague epic. Whereas literal arrows, hot pitch, and great populations can actually kill people, gnats, boils, and locusts only feel like they are inflicting death. Indeed, from this midrash's perspective, God is not only acting fairly, but is acting compassionately toward Egypt.

It is interesting to note that a variation of this midrash appears in *Pesikta Rabbati*.⁵⁶ The variant is attributed to Rabbi Levi bar Zechariah, who spoke in the name of Rabbi Berechiah. *Pesikta Rabbati* presents an abbreviated version of this parable. It begins (as in *Tanhuma*), "God set upon the Egyptians with the tactics of kings," but then omits the reference to Egypt as a rebellious state. Instead of explicitly putting down a revolt, God's struggle with Egypt could be interpreted as two powers in conflict. This, though, is doubtful since the tradition in *Pesikta Rabbati* is clearly the same as in *Tanhuma*.

Though most of the plagues' counterparts remain consistent with the *Tanhuma* text, one of the military strategies differs. Rather than seeing the locusts as a great population brought against the rebelling state, the locusts are called "conquerors." This is a subtle, yet sharp, contrast. A "great population" implies a tactic to overpower them, while "conquerors" suggests a strategy meant to wreak destruction and overtake the city,

possibly by tearing down defenses.⁵⁷ This then, could lead readers to interpret the relationship between God and the Egyptians as two independent kingdoms at war with each other, rather than one source of ultimate power putting down a group of unruly subjects.

After comparing the plagues to a military strategy, Midrash Tanhuma provides another set of reasons to explain why each plague in particular was issued against the Egyptians.⁵⁸ This passage seeks to explain the plagues as a response to the various schemes that the Egyptians had plotted against the Israelite slaves. The midrash portrays a system of poetic justice:

1. The Egyptians wanted the Israelites to draw water, so He turned their streams into blood.
2. The Egyptians wanted them to bear their wares and business goods, so He brought the frogs upon them so that they were destroyed.
3. The Egyptians wanted them to work the land for them, so gnats overtook the land.
4. The Egyptians wanted them to be tutors to their children, so He sent the *Arov* against them: lions, wolves, tigers, bears, and eagles... [to carry off their children].
5. The Egyptians wanted the Israelites to be shepherds for their cattle, so He issued the murrain.
6. The Egyptians wanted them to heat water for their bathhouses, so He sent boils on them so they would not be able to bathe.
7. The Egyptians wanted to stone them with rocks, so He brought hail against them.
8. The Egyptians wanted them to be their vineyard keepers, so He brought the locusts, which ate their trees, all the grass of the earth, and all the fruit of the trees.
9. The Egyptians wanted to imprison them in jails, so God brought darkness upon them.

⁵⁶ Piska 17:7.

⁵⁷ Much like the Romans did to Jerusalem in 70 CE.

⁵⁸ Bo, 4 and Tanhuma Buber, Bo 5.

10. They wanted to kill them, so God struck the first-born.

It is interesting that this litany is preceded by the phrase *כל מה שחשבו המצרים* [הקב"ה] עליהם, "all that the Egyptians sought to bring upon Israel, God brought against them." With the exception of the final plague – slaying the first-born children – this is not really the case. The Egyptians are not made to be water-drawers, load-bearers, land-workers, and the like. Therefore, God did not actually cause them to experience what they had designed for Israel. The plagues were not fashioned *in* the image of the Egyptians' schemes. They rather foiled their outcomes.

From this midrash's viewpoint, it seems that the plagues as a whole were intended to serve two key functions. Either each plague was a means to liberate the Israelites from performing specific tasks, or it was a punishment that would foil the Egyptians' schemes against the Israelites. Moreover, the plague visited an analogue upon the Egyptians, which would negate their designs against the Israelites. The Israelites were freed from drawing water since the water was turned to blood, and therefore not useful to the Egyptians in any way. Likewise, the slaves could not carry wares for the Egyptians since everything was eaten and destroyed by the frogs. Other tasks such as working the land, attending children, tending the cattle, heating water in connection with the Egyptians' baths, and caring for the vineyards were also rendered moot. Since the objects of the tasks were destroyed or impaired by the respective plagues, the Israelites did not have to perform these functions. The hail and the darkness were designed to give the Egyptians a taste of the torment that they were inflicting on the Israelites. Though they were not literally stoned or imprisoned, the Egyptians could relate to these hardships due to the plagues. By analogy, the hailstones become the stones that the Egyptians threw at the

Israelites. Likewise, the darkness became the jail since it did not allow the Egyptians to move about freely. Only the last plague serves to demonstrate exactly what the Israelites suffered to the Egyptians in a very physical, tangible fashion.

Exodus Rabbah is another source that understands the plagues as specific retributions for the Egyptians' treatment of the Israelites. In presenting the first plague, the midrash asks, מִפְּנֵי מָה הֵבִיא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם דָּם? מֵדָה כְּנֹגֵד מֵדָה, "why did God bring [the plague of] blood on them? [To punish them] measure for measure." Though this rationale is stated in relation to the water's becoming blood, the "tit for tat" understanding of the plagues applies to Exodus Rabbah's treatment of the plagues in general.

According to this midrash, the Egyptians would not allow the Israelite women to immerse themselves in the *mikveh*. This prevented the Israelites from fulfilling the command to be fruitful and multiply. This offended God immensely. It was very fitting, then, that God would change the Egyptian waters into blood.⁵⁹ Because the Israelites could not purify themselves after menstruation, they were forced to carry on this period of bleeding in a physical sense. Hence, the Egyptians were also made to experience this bloodied state. Furthermore, since the Israelites could not purify themselves through water, the Egyptians were denied their ability to keep clean using water.

Like the plague of blood, the frogs also served as "tit for tat" punishment.⁶⁰ When it was time for this plague to conclude, the frogs that had been brought upon Egypt died. The Egyptians gathered the corpses into heaps, which resulted in an extremely foul

⁵⁹ Va'era 9:10.

⁶⁰ Va'era 10:6.

odor throughout the land. Thus the midrash states, “The land stank, because Israel had been made to stink due to the Egyptians’ blows – measure for measure.” Again, we see that God was concerned with punishing Egypt in relation to their mistreatment of Israel. Through the stench of the frogs, the Egyptians received a taste of what they had done to the Israelites.

Another reason for the frogs’ presence is that it served to release the Israelites from a specific duty imposed on them by the Egyptians. In this context, the invasion of the frogs is a grand item of irony in Exodus Rabbah.⁶¹ The Egyptians had forced the Israelites to bring all sorts of “reptiles and creeping things,” which the Israelites deemed ritually impure. God therefore retaliated by causing the frogs to take over the land to such an extent that “when they [the Egyptians] went to mix a drink, the cup was full of frogs.” It seems that this plague not only liberated the Israelites from performing a grotesque task (much like the purpose of the plague as recounted in the Tanhuma text), but also made a mockery of the Egyptian scheme to degrade the Israelites by making them carry unclean things.

The gnats are also seen as a means to thwart the Egyptian demands upon Israel. The text asks, “Why did He bring gnats upon them? Since they made Israel sweepers of the streets and markets, the dust was turned into gnats,” so there would be no dirt to sweep.⁶² Likewise, the ערוב (here understood to be swarms of animals) were a ridiculous intensification of an Egyptian whim, since the Egyptians would make the Israelites bring bears, lions, and tigers כְּדִי לְהִיּוֹת מִצְרִיִּם בָּהּ — “in order to be tormented

⁶¹ Va’era 10:4.

⁶² Va’era 10:7.

by them.”⁶³ Through the swarms of wild beasts, God freed the Israelites from having to perform this awful task. Moreover, in an ironic twist, God has sent animals now to torment the Egyptians rather than the Israelites.⁶⁴

The reasons cited for the murrain and the boils remain relatively consistent with the Tanhuma text. The only glaring difference is that Exodus Rabbah specifically states that the Egyptians sent the Israelites to be shepherds so that they would be far away from their wives and thus unable to procreate.⁶⁵ The motivation for the hail and locusts in Exodus Rabbah fits into the theme of denying the Egyptians Israelite labor. The hail was sent to destroy the vineyards, gardens, fields and trees that the Israelites were meant to tend.⁶⁶ This plague destroyed all of the vegetation, and therefore made the task moot. Likewise, the locusts ate up all of the wheat and barley that the Israelites had planted for the Egyptians.⁶⁷ This demonstrates the futility of the Egyptians’ designs upon Israel. Not only did this plague release the Israelites from having to perform this task, but it also indicated that Egyptians would derive no benefit from Israelite labor.

It is intriguing that Exodus Rabbah does not give an explanation for the last two plagues that would conform to this pattern. Rather than pointing to an Egyptian demand as a motivation, this source teaches that the darkness was brought to Egypt in order to conceal the execution of Israelite transgressors.⁶⁸ The midrash states, “There were sinners in Israel. that had Egyptian patrons, as well as wealth and honor, and they did not

⁶³ Va’era 11:3.

⁶⁴ It can be argued that the play on words *mitzeirim* and *mitzrim* is no coincidence. However, since manuscripts read בהם מטיילים, “so that the Egyptians could have sport with them,” it is likely that the printed version is corrupt [Avigdor Shinan, *Midrash Shemot-Rabbah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir Co. Ltd., 1984), pp. 239-240.].

⁶⁵ Va’era 11:4.

⁶⁶ Va’era 12:3.

⁶⁷ Bo 13:6.

want to leave (Egypt).” God feared that striking them in broad daylight would erroneously cause the Egyptians to think that they were being spared from a plague meant to injure the Israelites. Therefore, God caused a great and heavy darkness to cover up this necessary action against the sinful Israelites. As to the reason dictating the slaying of the first-born sons, the text remains silent. Perhaps this is because the Rabbis felt that the motivation for this last plague is obvious: Pharaoh did not heed any of the previous plagues, so God had to resort to taking human life. God realized the potency of this final plague. As it is written in the midrash, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If I bring the slaying of the first-born first, he (Pharaoh) will release them. Rather, I will bring other plagues upon them first, and I will bring this thing (slaying the first-born sons) after I have brought all the rest on them.”⁶⁹ Clearly, the Rabbis saw this last plague as the ultimate form of retribution and coercion in God’s struggle to liberate the Israelites.

Seder Eliyahu Rabbah draws a very similar picture regarding the first eight plagues to that in the Tanhuma and Exodus Rabbah literature. Like the other two sources, Eliyahu Rabbah understands the plagues as responses to the various tasks that the Egyptians forced on the Israelites. What is innovative in this text is its connection of the various responsibilities imposed upon Israel with sex. This midrash focuses on the Egyptians’ efforts to make it impossible for the Israelites to enjoy intercourse and, subsequently, produce children. The *mikveh* reference (as it relates to the first plague) is a very clear illustration of this. Since the women could not immerse themselves and become clean, the couples could not engage in sex.⁷⁰ The frogs also caused the Israelites

⁶⁸ Bo 14:3.

⁶⁹ Bo 18:5.

⁷⁰ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 8:5.

to remain in an impure state. The text teaches that the Egyptians wanted the loathsome and crawling creatures so that "we can play with them as we want."⁷¹ Some scholars have understood the phrase "to play with" as a reference to illicit sexual acts which would cause the Israelites to become unclean.⁷² Seder Eliyahu Rabbah adds to the explanation of the gnats by stating, "A man would sweep a woman's house and a woman would sweep a man's house."⁷³ It can be argued that setting Israelite men in Egyptian women's homes and vice versa promoted adultery between the two peoples. This, too, would prevent the Israelites from procreating with each other.

The swarms of beasts, murrain, hail, and locusts all stem from similar causes. Eliyahu Rabbah elaborates on the reason why the Israelites were sent to remote areas of Egypt in order to perform such duties as gathering beasts, shepherding cattle, planting trees, and cultivating wheat and barley: the Egyptians sent the Israelite men to the farthest regions in order to keep them away from their wives. The text explains, "[This was] so that they were in the farthest wildernesses and would not enter their houses and engage in sex with one another and be fruitful and multiply."⁷⁴

According to Eliyahu Rabbah, the motivation for the boils is connected with the drawing of baths for the Egyptians. Like the Tanhuma passages, this midrash understands the "hot things" to be hot water. Consequently, the Israelites were kept busy preparing the Egyptians' baths. Due to the boils, the Egyptians were not able to tolerate touching the water — be it hot or cold. Therefore, the Israelites did not have to be

⁷¹ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 8:6.

⁷² William G. Braude, transl., *Tanna Debe Eliyyahu: The Lore of the School of Elijah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society, 1981), p. 136.

⁷³ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 8:9.

⁷⁴ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 8:10, 11, 13, 14.

involved in this duty. The text asks, "So what did Israel do at this time? They went and washed themselves in water and entered their houses joyfully." This plague enabled the Israelites to enjoy the conjugal intercourse that they had been previously denied.

Though these midrashim vary in their interpretations of the plagues, one theme is consistent. The Rabbis were greatly concerned to make sense of the plagues. By assigning order and purpose to these measures, the Rabbis were better able to deal with their repercussions. An immense amount of destruction and violence was caused by the ten plagues. The midrashim help to explain not only why this was so necessary, but also why this was so justified. God is seen as a fair and well-intentioned ruler. Therefore, his measures are not arbitrary or cruel, but are just. According to the midrashim, the plagues are not random acts of cruelty against a foreign nation. Instead, they are meaningful and appropriate responses to the Egyptians' cruel and unusual treatment of the Israelites.

III. Pharaoh's Wicked Ways

The plagues inflicted the severest degree of suffering on the Egyptians. Nothing was left unscathed: fields were ravaged, animals were stricken, and human life was endangered. Therefore, the Rabbis sought to understand why this group of people in particular deserved to be punished in such a harsh fashion. In turning to the text itself, the Rabbis discovered God's stated motivation for unleashing the various plagues: "Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go..." (Exodus 7:14). However, there is a problem with this motivation. For Pharaoh is not necessarily stubborn due to his own volition. Indeed, the text often makes reference to the fact that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart. This, then, is the reason for his unyielding attitude to Moses' demands for liberation. Thus, it was up to the Rabbis to reconcile these two phenomena: Pharaoh's wickedness on the one hand, and God's role in hardening Pharaoh's heart on the other.

According to the Bible, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is the central cause of Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to let the Israelites go. However, according to the midrashic sources, Pharaoh's evil character was well established long before his heart was hardened. Indeed, the Rabbis understood Pharaoh as deceitful and perverse.

Early in the plague narrative, God commands Moses, "Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water..." (Exodus 7:15). This verse intrigued the Rabbis, since it appears to contain superfluous details. Why was it so important that Moses should confront Pharaoh in the morning? Furthermore, why mention Pharaoh's

going to the water? The Rabbis therefore used these two details to illustrate Pharaoh's conniving ways.

Exodus Rabbah 9:8 states, "[Pharaoh] would only go out to the water in the morning. This is because this wicked man would boast and say that he was a god, and did not need to relieve himself. Hence, he would go out in the morning. It was at this instant that Moses was to catch him." Pharaoh was so concerned to maintain his fraudulent claims that he was a divine being that he would perform his very human bodily functions in secret. This midrash presents a somewhat comical view of Pharaoh. For it portrays this mighty ruler – a ruler whose subjects regard him as a god – sneaking out to the Nile River before anyone else in Egypt has arisen from bed in order to urinate. God's sending Moses to Pharaoh at this very time serves to call attention to Pharaoh's hypocrisy. It also allows Moses to confront Pharaoh at an extremely vulnerable moment since Moses catches the powerful ruler with his pants down, literally.

Tanhuma Buber offers a variant reading of this tradition.⁷⁵ Whereas in Exodus Rabbah, the timing of Moses' confrontation is meant to humiliate Pharaoh, the Tanhuma text views the scene as a didactic opportunity. The Tanhuma midrash juxtaposes the Exodus verse with Psalm 9:21: "Put מורָה into them, O Lord; the nations will then know themselves to be but men, Selah." Traditionally, מורָה is translated as "fear" in the context of the psalm. In this midrash, though, מורָה is read as "foolishness," relating to the Greek word *moros*. As the text states, "What is this מורָה? [It implies:] let the spirit of stupidity enter into them." Thus, the Rabbis engage in a word play with מורִיּוֹת, which

⁷⁵ Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 16.

means “mastery” or “sovereignty.” This sense of מורִיּוֹת is what mortal kings claim for themselves. The midrash proceeds to give four examples of humans who unsuccessfully proclaimed themselves to be gods, thus resulting in their מורָה, “foolishness”: Hiram, “the prince of Tyre”⁷⁶; Nebuchadnezzar; Joash, king of Judah; and Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

In describing Pharaoh’s self-proclaimed godliness, Tanhuma cites Ezekiel 29:9, “And the land of Egypt shall be desolate and waste, and they shall know that I am the Lord, because he [Pharaoh] has said: The River is mine, and I have made it.” The Rabbis infer from this that Pharaoh also said, “I am the one who created myself.” It was when Pharaoh uttered these words that God immediately caused Pharaoh to be reminded that he was, in fact, human. God therefore said, “Because he has made himself as a god, tell him that he is flesh and blood. See, he is going on his way to attend to his [bodily] needs in the morning. Grab him and tell him that he is human.” The midrash relates that this is exactly what Moses did. When Pharaoh was approached by Moses, he said, “Leave me alone so that I can attend to my [bodily] needs, and afterwards I will speak with you.” Moses responded, “Is there a God who has to attend to [bodily] needs?” It was by this exchange that Pharaoh was reminded that he was not truly a deity, but rather a mere mortal who was pretending to be divine.

The similarities between the Exodus Rabbah and the Tanhuma versions of this midrash are striking. Both teach that Pharaoh portrayed himself as a deity. However, the Exodus Rabbah text makes it clear that Pharaoh did so in a cognizant, deceitful manner. The Tanhuma text, on the other hand, is more ambiguous. It is possible that Pharaoh

⁷⁶ Ezekiel 28:2.

really did consider himself as a god. Arrogance, rather than duplicity, could be the motivating factor. This would explain the different tones of the two midrashim. The Exodus Rabbah passage describes a humiliating experience for Pharaoh in which Moses makes it clear that Pharaoh's ruse is about to be revealed. The Tanhuma passage describes a scene in which Moses confronts Pharaoh in private in order to point out the absurdity of Pharaoh's claim.

A similar tradition concerning Pharaoh is found earlier in Tanhuma Buber.⁷⁷ Like the previous passage, this midrash compares Pharaoh with Hiram, Nebuchadnezzar, and Joash. In addition, the Rabbis also base this midrashic text on the Ezekiel 29 passage that describes Pharaoh's calling himself a god. The midrash reads, "Now this (Pharaoh) is one of four mortal men who made themselves into gods and [as punishment] were ravaged like women." The prooftext for Pharaoh's sexual ravagement is found in Jeremiah 44:30: "Behold, I am giving Pharaoh Hophra, king of Egypt, into the hands of his enemies." Even though the biblical text spells "Hophra" as **הפרע**, the midrash presents the word as **הפרע**. By changing the word's first letter from **ח** to **ה**, the Rabbis render an entirely different meaning of the passage. With this change, the root of the word becomes **פרע**, "to uncover." Whereas the biblical text is speaking about Hophra, the pharaoh who was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE, the midrashic text views the Jeremiah verse as referring to the Pharaoh of the Exodus narrative. Rather than reading **פרעה הפרע** as a personal name, the Rabbis interpret **הפרע הפרע** as "the pharaoh who was uncovered." By employing *gezerah shavah*, the Rabbis understood "uncovered" as feminine passive intercourse. They base this on a passage from Numbers

5:18, "And he shall uncover the woman's head." It is interesting that the two words are intrinsically related through the shared root פִּרְעַ. Perhaps the Rabbis are also playing with the letters in the title "Pharaoh," which are the same letters as in the name Hophra.

Pharaoh's wickedness can also be inferred from his reaction to the plagues. Several times throughout the narrative, Pharaoh promises to let the Israelites go if only the plagues would stop. Moses thereupon asks God to call off the particular plague in question. Rather than living up to his promise, Pharaoh reneges on his part of the deal and keeps the Israelites enslaved. The Rabbis regard this behavior as indicative of his evil nature. For example, in Exodus Rabbah 10:6, the Rabbis comment on the verse describing what transpires after the frogs cease to be a nuisance: "But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite..." (Exodus 8:11). The Rabbis note, "This is the way of the wicked: when they are in trouble they cry out and in the moment of respite they return to their perversity." Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 22 makes a similar comment on Pharaoh's actions after the hail has stopped. This midrash muses, "This is [the way of] the wicked: when they see that trouble is coming upon them they humble themselves. And when the trouble passes and they see relief, they return to their evil deeds." Pharaoh thus becomes paradigmatic of the wicked people in the world.⁷⁸

Another instance in which Pharaoh's nature is demonstrated by his reaction to the frogs is recorded in Exodus Rabbah 10:5. This midrash focuses on the verse, "Then Pharaoh called..." (Exodus 8:4). The Rabbis note, "As soon as punishment touched his body, he felt the pain and began to cry." This explains why there was no protest against

⁷⁷ Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 8. This midrash is also found in Tanhuma, Va'era 9.

the first plague from Pharaoh. The water's turning to blood did not physically affect Pharaoh in a personal way. Thus, we can infer that Pharaoh only cared about matters that directly concerned him. The suffering of his people was of little, if any, import to him.

These midrashim address the issue of Pharaoh's deserving the ten plagues. However, they do not speak to the Egyptians as a whole. Even if Pharaoh was as evil as the Rabbis held him to be, why should an entire nation be punished on his account? In response to this concern, the Rabbis determined that every Egyptian was as spiteful as Pharaoh. In Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, we read: "They (Pharaoh and the Egyptians) were filled with anger and vengefulness toward Israel. Therefore, the Holy One was filled with anger and vengefulness against him (Pharaoh) and his encampment (the Egyptians). Thus one learns that from the day that God created the world until this exact hour, each and every one receives the recompense that is coming to him, whether it be good or bad."⁷⁹ This midrash teaches that the Egyptian people deserved the infliction of the ten plagues, since they were just as vindictive toward the Hebrews as was Pharaoh.

This midrash continues with a further explanation as to why Egypt was due the pain of the ten plagues as opposed to the other countries that had oppressed the Israelites. According to Eliyahu Rabbah, at the time of the ten plagues, Egypt ruled the entire world.⁸⁰ Therefore, Egypt was held more responsible for her conduct than the other nations. The midrash states that no other country was as "steeped in filthy and unworthy ways, nor suspected of witchcraft and lechery" as was Egypt. This is why Egypt was so

⁷⁸ Similar midrashim are found in Exodus Rabbah 12:7 and Tanhuma, Va'era 17. These midrashim comment on Pharaoh's reaction to the hail.

⁷⁹ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 8:2.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 8:3.

hated by God. What is so interesting about this midrashic passage is that Egypt's treachery is not connected to its conduct toward Israel. Rather, Israel's role in the narrative is seen as serving as a snare for Egypt. The Rabbis teach, "Therefore, the Egyptians were punished through Israel. The Holy One sought to restore His reputation through them [the Israelites]." The midrash presents a parable to further describe Egypt's insult to God's authority. The parable portrays a mortal king who would sit and review the armies of the subsidiary kings as they pass by. One king's army passed before him without bearing any arms, a sure sign of disrespect for the king's rule. The king did not protest. Again, another subsidiary king's army came without bearing any arms. After this, the king stood up in angry protest, cognizant of the unabashed insult toward him. This analogy represents God's growing impatience with the Egyptians. For generations, Egypt had shown contempt for God's ways. Their sorcery and lewdness were an affront to the divine. Yet, God did not punish them, perhaps out of hope that this disrespect would pass. However, when later pharaohs did not perform any better than the earlier rulers, God knew that Egypt's irreverence was no passing fancy. Therefore, God used the plight of the Israelites as an occasion to launch retribution.

In commenting on the Egyptians' wickedness, the Rabbis in Exodus Rabbah draw attention to the biblical verse in which Pharaoh blatantly states, "I have sinned this time; the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked" (Exodus 9:27).⁸¹ The midrash elaborates that Pharaoh made this admission based on his reaction to the hail. God had given Pharaoh an opportunity to save the Egyptian cattle from the hail, yet this warning was ignored. The midrash explains, "Thus He (God) had dealt righteously with them by

⁸¹ Exodus Rabbah 12:5.

warning them, but he (Pharaoh) and his people were wicked, paying no heed to the word of the Lord and leaving their men and cattle in the field, with the result that all of them died.” Clearly, not even Pharaoh could deny the Egyptians’ folly when confronted with the needless destruction of both animal and human life.

Even though midrashic traditions illustrate the wicked nature of the Egyptians as a whole, Pharaoh is still named as the primary cause of the Israelites’ suffering. In describing the fourth plague, the biblical text states, “And there came a grievous swarm into the house of Pharaoh, and into his servants’ houses; and in all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by reason of the swarm” (Exodus 8:20). The Rabbis give much weight to the order of the swarm’s infestation. Tanhuma, Va’era 14 notes, “They came to Pharaoh first because he was the first to counsel evil against them, as it is said, ‘And Pharaoh charged all his people’”⁸² This brief line of midrash provides vast insight to the rabbinic conception of responsibility. Since Pharaoh was the one who counseled and initiated the Israelites’ strife, he is the one to be punished first. However, those who carried out the orders are not exempt from punishment. Since they agreed to fulfill Pharaoh’s evil decrees, they too are stricken. However, their retribution comes only after Pharaoh is made to suffer.⁸³

The Rabbis make a good case for Pharaoh’s and the Egyptians’ inherent evil nature. According to the midrashim, this natural wickedness alone would justify the Ten Plagues. However, the Rabbis cannot ignore the fact that the text makes reference to God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as a reason for his obstinacy. Therefore, the Rabbis

⁸² Exodus 8:18.

⁸³ A similar midrash is found in Exodus Rabbah 11:3.

endeavor to reconcile Pharaoh's own shady character with the divine manipulation of his will.

In Exodus Rabbah 13:3, Rabbi Johanan points out the difficulties presented by God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. He asks, "Does this not give heretics an opportunity to argue that he had no means of repenting, since it says, 'For I have hardened his heart?'" Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish replies that this is not a cogent argument. He teaches, "When the Holy One warns a man a first time, a second time, and a third time, and the man does not repent, then God locks his heart from repentance in order to exact punishment from him for his sin. This is how it is with Pharaoh the wicked one. God sent [warning] to him five times and he did not pay attention to the matter. So God said, "'You have stiffened your neck and hardened your heart. Behold I will add to your uncleanness.'" This midrash alludes to an ambiguity found in the biblical text concerning Pharaoh's heart. Throughout the plague narrative, it is said that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. Yet, in the first half of the story, it is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart. After the fifth plague, the text reveals that God is now hardening the monarch's heart. Therefore, Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish claims that even though God hardened Pharaoh's heart, it was Pharaoh who set his own course.

Exodus Rabbah 11:6 elaborates on this theme.⁸⁴ This midrash states, "When the Holy One saw that he would not repent from the first five plagues... the Holy One said, 'Even if he wants to repent, I will harden his heart so that I can exact the full punishment from him.'" It is interesting that this midrash views the functions of the first five plagues and the last five plagues differently. It appears that the first five plagues were meant to

be warnings for Pharaoh to relent. The last five plagues seem to be the punishment for not heeding the previous warnings. It is as if Pharaoh had not only lost his chance for repenting, but also lost his chance for calling off the rest of the plagues.

The timing of Moses's confrontation with Pharaoh is also linked to God's preventing Pharaoh from repenting. In Exodus Rabbah 11:1, the Rabbis discuss the verse, "Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh" (Exodus 8:16). The midrash teaches that the reason Moses had to go so early was to prevent Pharaoh from repenting and praying to God before the plagues could be unleashed. Rabbi Phinehas, the priest, son of Rabbi Hama cites, "But they that are godless in heart lay up anger, they do not cry when he binds them" (Job 36:13). He expounds, "Even though they want to return to God and engage in prayer, they are not able. Why? Because God has locked the way before them. Thus it was with Pharaoh. He wanted to engage in prayer, and the Holy One said to Moses, 'Before he goes out, go and stand before him.'" It is interesting to note that this midrash deals with the scene preceding the fourth plague. This would seem to contradict the previously cited passage, which claims that God interfered with Pharaoh's repentance only at the onset of the fifth plague. Even though Rabbi Phinehas does not make reference to hardening Pharaoh's heart, this midrash does reveal a manipulation of Pharaoh's ability to repent.

An opposing midrash is found in Exodus Rabbah 12:1. This passage addresses a similar verse, "And the Lord said unto Moses: Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh..." (Exodus 9:13). According to this midrashic text, God gave Moses the "strength to rise up early and station himself before Pharaoh so that he could teach

⁸⁴ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va'era 3.

Pharaoh the path to repentance.” Clearly, according to this tradition, Moses actually urged Pharaoh to repent before bringing any plague upon him. The midrash also provides a reason why the text omits any reference to Pharaoh’s going to the water at this juncture. This is because Pharaoh knew that whenever he would venture out to the Nile in the morning, Moses would catch him on his way. Therefore, “he refrained from going out so that he would not meet Moses. [So,] God said to [Moses], ‘Go to his place early in the morning, before he leaves his house.’” It is telling that this midrash deals with the onset of the seventh plague. For this passage contradicts the midrashim that portray God as exacting a full punishment from Pharaoh. Rather, God is depicted as merciful, giving Pharaoh an opportunity to repent before bringing on each plague. In contrast to the previous midrashim, this passage portrays God and Moses as wishing to empower and teach Pharaoh how to attain repentance, rather than preventing him from doing so.

In addressing the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, the Rabbis engage in several word plays on the word **הַכֹּבֶדֶתִי**. In Exodus Rabbah 13:3, the Rabbis compare Pharaoh’s heart to a liver, **כֶּבֶד**. Just as a liver does not allow any juice to enter when cooked a second time, Pharaoh’s heart would not allow the words of God to enter when hardened a second time. Thus, Pharaoh is ultimately responsible for not repenting, since he had already prevented himself from repentance.

Another allusion to the liver is in Exodus Rabbah 9:8. This midrash comments on God’s saying to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is stubborn” (Exodus 7:14). The midrash teaches, “Just as the liver is angry, so too has this man’s heart become angry. He does not understand, he is a fool.” This midrash juxtaposes the heart, which was considered to

be the source of mental prowess, with the liver, which was considered to be the source of anger. Thus, it reads the biblical verse not as “his heart was hardened,” but as “his heart was like a liver.”

Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 14, compares the word כבד, “harden” with the word כבד “honor.”⁸⁵ God declares, “By your life, through the very same word with which you have hardened (הכבדת) your heart, I will be honored (מתכבד).” The proof text for this is found later in the Exodus narrative: “When I have been honored (בהכבדי) through Pharaoh...” (Exodus 14:18).

Exodus Rabbah 13:1 compares Pharaoh's transgressions with Israel's sins by means of a *gezerah shavah* on the word כבד. This midrash opens with the verse, “A stone is heavy, and the sand weighty; but a fool's vexation is heavier than they both” (Proverbs 27:3). The Rabbis identify the heavy stone as Israel, based on the verse, “From there, from the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel” (Genesis 49:24). They also identify the weighty sand as Israel, based on the verse, “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea” (Hosea 2:1). According to the midrash, the Israelites' sins were so grievous at the time of the Exodus that God was tempted to destroy them. Therefore, the metaphors for Israel (stone and sand) are described as “heavy,” and “weighty.” Yet, the verse continues, “a fool's vexation is heavier, כבד, than they both.” The Rabbis understand this phrase as an allusion to Pharaoh's heart that was made heavy, כבד. God was aware that if Israel were to be destroyed, the “wicked Pharaoh” would then say, “He wasn't able to save them so he killed them.” Thus, God had to decide which was a bigger

⁸⁵ A similar midrash is found in Exodus Rabbah 9:8.

offense: Israel's sins or Pharaoh's taunting. In the end, God determined that Pharaoh's vexation outweighed any wrongdoings that the Israelites had committed. Therefore, the Israelites' liberation from Egypt was directly related to Pharaoh's hardened and heavy heart.

These midrashim teach us that Pharaoh's nature was at the core of the plagues narrative. Were it not for his utterly evil character, according to the Rabbis, the plagues would not have persisted for as long as they did, nor would they have been as severe as they were. His wickedness is demonstrated through his deception (pretending that he was a god), his unreliability (not fulfilling his promises to release the Israelites after the various plagues had ceased), and his stubbornness (refusing to repent after the first five plagues). The plagues, therefore, are understood as a means not only to punish Pharaoh, but also to teach us what can happen if we, too, refuse to heed God's calls for righteous behavior.

Chapter IV. The Division of the Plagues

As noted in the first chapter, modern scholars have grouped the ten plagues in four groups: three triads and one singular blow. The three triads consist of blood, frogs, and lice as the first series; swarms, murrain, and boils as the second series; hail, locusts, and darkness as the third triad. The plague that stands by itself, according to biblical critics, is the death of the first-born. The Rabbis also devised a system for grouping the plagues. However, rather than focusing on the order in which the plagues appear in the biblical narrative, the Rabbis base their categorization on the means by which the plagues came into being.

The Passover Haggadah teaches that Rabbi Judah abbreviated the plagues by means of three acronyms: דצ"ך עד"ש באח"ב. Although it is clear that these acronyms are comprised of the first letter of each plague in the order in which they appear in the biblical narrative, commentators have often endeavored to uncover a deeper significance in Rabbi Judah's division of the plagues into three words. In a commentary on the Haggadah, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin states, "Most likely, [the acronyms] were invented to indicate that the plagues occurred at three different levels, which represented different aspects of Divine mastery over nature and the world. Blood, frogs, and lice affected the ground... Wild beasts, pestilence, and boils affected those who lived upon the land. Hail, locust, and darkness involved the atmosphere. The slaying of the firstborn taught that our God is also the Lord over life and death."⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Shlomo Riskin, The Passover Haggadah with a Traditional and Contemporary Commentary (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1983), pp. 90-91.

Another rabbinic vantage point regarding the categorization of the plagues can be discerned in a midrash found in Exodus Rabbah. While it is implicitly understood that God is the ultimate source of all action in the plague narrative, Exodus Rabbah 12:4 notes that different parties are the immediate agents of the various plagues. Much like modern scholars, the ancient Rabbis divided the plagues into three groups of three and one group of one. The midrash states, "Three of these plagues were performed by Aaron, three were performed by Moses, and three were performed by the Holy One. One was performed by all of them." It is interesting that the Rabbis' first triad is the same as that of modern biblical scholars. The midrash continues, "Blood, frogs, and lice: in that they were on the earth, were performed by Aaron." This statement accounts for the first three plagues encountered in the biblical text. This, however, is the only correlation between the midrashic and modern scholarly groupings of the plagues. The Rabbis went on, "Hail, locusts, darkness: Moses performed these since they are in the air and Moses had control over the earth and the heavens. The Holy One performed swarms, pestilence, and the death of the first-born. Boils were performed by all of them."

It is interesting to note that the Rabbis did not base their system of organizing the plagues on the growing intensity or drama of the narrative. Rather, they determined the groupings on the basis of who was immediately responsible for each of the plague's appearance. This is telling regarding how the Rabbis viewed this biblical narrative. Generally speaking, they did not look at the story as a whole. Instead, they studied each aspect of the text on its own, as a separate entity. While there are some midrashim⁸⁷ that

⁸⁷ Examples of such midrashim can be found in Chapter Two.

deal with the plagues as a whole, the bulk of the rabbinic literature concentrates atomistically on each aspect of the narrative by itself.

V. The First Triad: Blood, Frogs, Lice

Shared Themes

In studying the first three plagues, it is helpful to keep the Rabbis' conception of organization in mind. There are two shared themes among the midrashim that comment on blood, frogs, and lice. The obvious commonality, as alluded to in Exodus Rabbah 12:4, is Aaron's active role. When studying the first plague, Rabbi Tanhum elaborates, "Why did not Moses strike the waters? The Holy One said to Moses, 'Since the waters protected you when you were sent down the Nile, it would not be just for you to strike them. By your life, they will be stricken only by Aaron.'" ⁸⁸

An abbreviated form of this tradition is cited in relation to the second plague. Since the frogs emerged from the waters, it was not fitting for Moses to be directly involved. Again, Rabbi Tanhum explicates, "The Holy One said to Moses, 'The waters that protected you at the time you were sent down the Nile should not be stricken by your hands.'" Thus, it was Aaron's responsibility to call this plague into being. ⁸⁹

A similar explanation is presented in regards to the lice. Because the lice originated from the dust of the earth rather than the Nile, the Rabbis needed to provide a reason why Moses should not be involved in this plague. Therefore, Rabbi Tanhum teaches, "The Holy One said to Moses, 'The earth that defended you when you murdered the Egyptian should not be stricken by hands.'" This passage summarizes, "Therefore,

⁸⁸ Exodus Rabbah 9:10.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 10:4.

these three plagues were performed through Aaron.”⁹⁰ From this we learn that Aaron’s role in the plagues was not necessarily due to his stature or merits. Indeed, Aaron seems to be the alternate to Moses. Only when the plagues offended the natural elements that had served a younger Moses was Aaron called to action.

Another shared attribute among the first three plagues is the Egyptian magicians’ attempts to duplicate them. After Aaron caused the waters to turn to blood, “the magicians of Egypt did so בלטיהם, with their secret arts” (Exodus 7:22). In Exodus Rabbah 9:11, the Rabbis note that this verse implies that the Egyptians believed the first plague to be nothing more than a magic trick, not a sign from God. The Rabbis were concerned with the magicians’ powers, since they seem to duplicate God’s actions. Therefore, Rabbi Aibo bar Nagri said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abbah, “The word בלטיהם refers to the works of demons. Yet, בלהטיהם in this context refers to the works of magicians. Thus, Genesis 3:24 employs the word, ‘And the flaming (להט) sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life’ since magical works are performed through the angels of destruction.” This midrash demonstrates that while the magicians appear to be as powerful as demons, they are mere mortals. Their magic is not a result of their own capabilities. Rather, it is granted to them on loan by the angels of destruction.

Seder Eliyahu Rabbah provides a revealing commentary regarding the magicians’ efforts to duplicate the second plague.⁹¹ The midrash states, “Pharaoh said to Moses, ‘You come to me with magic? Call the children from their schools and they will do just

⁹⁰ Ibid., 10:7.

⁹¹ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 8:6.

as you did!’ As it is said, ‘Pharaoh also called the sages and the magicians...’ (Exodus 7:11).” The Rabbis base the allusion to the school children on the word **בן**. Since the text states “also,” the Rabbis are able to infer that some party was summoned in addition to the noted sages and magicians. Thus, they explain that Pharaoh was so unimpressed with the frogs’ appearance that he compared this plague to a child’s magic trick.

While the magicians were successful in duplicating the first two plagues, they were unable to perform the third plague: turning dust into the lice. Exodus Rabbah 10:7 addresses the issue of why this was so. According to Rabbi Eleazar, “From here you learn that a demon is not able to create anything smaller than a lentil.” Since the lice were minuscule in size, the magicians (who are referred to as demons in this passage) could not produce them. The sages differ with Rabbi Eleazar’s theory and purport that magicians cannot even create something the size of a camel. They explain, “They do not create, but rather assemble them (the larger creatures). They are not able to assemble [the smaller creatures, such as lice].” Because the magicians could not replicate this third plague, they were forced to acknowledge that this wonder was not a magic trick. Indeed, as the text asserts, “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:15). The midrash continues, “When the magicians saw that they were not able to produce the lice, they immediately realized that the deeds (plagues) were the work of God, and not the work of demons (witchcraft). No longer did they claim to compare themselves to Moses in producing the plagues.” As Seder Eliyahu Rabbah concludes, “Moses and Aaron made blood, and the magicians made blood. Moses and Aaron made frogs, and the Egyptians made frogs. From then on [they stopped because] there is no one in the world who is able to create something smaller than a lentil.”

Blood

In studying the biblical text that first makes reference to the plague of blood, the Rabbis note Exodus 7:17 with particular interest: "Thus says the Lord, 'By this you will know that I am the Lord. For I will strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it (the water) shall be turned to blood.'" Based on this verse, the Rabbis are able to assert why this plague in particular is assigned as the first blow against the Egyptians. In Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 14, the Rabbis answer the question, "Why did God bring upon them the plague of blood first?" The midrash explains, "Since Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, the Holy One said to Moses, 'Go and strike their gods before them.' As the common (Aramaic) adage says, 'Destroy the god and the idol-priests are confounded.'"

Exodus Rabbah cites a very similar tradition. In addition to recapitulating the above argument, Exodus Rabbah 9:9 relates the Aramaic proverb to a passage from Isaiah: "And it will come to pass on that day that the Lord will punish the host of the high heavens on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth" (Isaiah 24:21). This verse is particularly apt since it teaches the order in which God will exact retribution: first on the gods that are worshipped, and then on the humans. Thus, by turning the Nile's water into blood, God is asserting His dominance over the Egyptian deities. From this, it can be understood that the first plague was not necessarily intended to affect the Egyptians in a personal and physical fashion. Rather, this plague was intended to show the Egyptians that they were foolishly worshipping powerless and false gods.

While the biblical text teaches that only the Nile's waters became blood, the Rabbis viewed this plague as affecting all the Egyptians' waters. They based this

understanding on Exodus 7:19, "Take your rod and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt: over its rivers, over its canals, over its ponds, and over all the bodies of its water so that they become blood." It is extremely feasible that this litany is an elaborate description of the various parts of the Nile. However, the Rabbis read this list as indicating different places where water was found. Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 14 explicates, "What does 'over its rivers' mean? That in every place that there was water it became blood. What does 'over every body of its water' mean? Even what was in their pitchers became blood, and even what an Egyptian spat from his mouth became blood. As it is said, 'And there was blood in all the land of Egypt' (Exodus 7: 19)."⁹²

Exodus Rabbah also teaches about the comprehensive nature of this first plague. In Exodus Rabbah 9:11, the Rabbis note that the biblical text states, "All the Egyptians dug about the River, for they could not drink of the water of the River" (Exodus 7:24). Rabbi Judah claims that this verse proves that the only water that was affected by the plague was the Nile River. However, Rabbi Nehemiah maintained that all of the water in Egypt – both above and below ground – was tainted. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Judah argued, "So what am I to make of the verse, 'All the Egyptians dug about the River'?" The midrash continues, "He (Rabbi Nehemiah) said to him (Rabbi Judah), 'Since the Egyptians said that all of the water that Moses and Aaron saw became blood, they would dig in order to extract drinking water from the places that Moses and Aaron did not see.'" Thus, Rabbi Nehemiah teaches that although the Egyptians hoped the waters below ground were untainted, their efforts to extract those waters were unsuccessful. The midrash then continues by explaining exactly how all of the waters became blood. Rabbi

⁹² Similar midrashim are found in Exodus Rabbah 9:10 and Tanhuma, Va'era 13.

Berachiah teaches, "This can be compared to a slave who was being beaten by his master. What would he do? Once he was beaten on his stomach, he would turn himself over (for relief, yet) he would then be beaten on his back. So it is with the Nile. It turned itself over so that it would not be overtaken by the plague. Yet, this was to no avail in that it entirely turned to blood." This midrash not only demonstrates the extent of the first plague's impact. It also echoes a previous theme: the Israelite God can always best an Egyptian deity, in this case the Nile.

Another depiction of the totality of the water's turning to blood is the reference to the waters that were **בַּעֲצִים וּבִאֲבָנִים**, in the "wood and stones" (Exodus 7:19). Exodus Rabbah 9:11 provides two explanations for what this phrase could mean. One explanation is that the "wood and stones" could be an allusion to the Egyptians' idols. This interpretation is supported by a *gezerah shavah*. In Jeremiah 2:27, it is written, "They say to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You have brought us forth.'" Another interpretation of **בַּעֲצִים וּבִאֲבָנִים** is that these words should be read as "*vessels of wood and vessels of stone*." The midrash continues by presenting both possibilities, "The water that they would drink with an Israelite in one vessel – whether it was wooden or stone – would turn to blood in their mouth. Some say that even their altars and their toilets were stricken with blood. When one of them would go to sit down on a bed, a stone, or a rock, their clothes would be spoiled because of the blood."

Seder Eliyahu Rabbah also makes note of the water in the vessels.⁹³ It records the following teaching, "An Egyptian would say to an Israelite, 'Give me some water!' The Israelite would give him the water, and it would be blood. The Egyptian would say to the

Israelite, 'You drink it!' The Israelite would drink it and it would be water. The Egyptian would then say, 'Let you and me drink from one vessel.' The water divided: water for the Israelite and blood for the Egyptian." This midrash further explains the significance of this plague. While it affected any and all of the waters that belonged to the Egyptians, it left the Israelites' water untouched. Thus, the Rabbis teach that the plagues were only meant to cause the Egyptians pain and suffering – not the Israelites. Hence, God's justice is displayed: the innocent do not suffer the punishment that the wicked bear.

Rabbi Abin the Levite elaborates on this theory. In addition to distinguishing the Israelites from the Egyptians, this sage believed that the water's different forms also served to benefit the Israelites. He explains:

The Israelites got wealthy from the Plague of Blood. How so? When an Egyptian and an Israelite were in one house and there was a barrel filled with water, the Egyptian would go to fill his pitcher from it and would discover that it was filled with blood. However, the Israelite would drink water from the barrel. The Egyptian would then say to him, "Give me some water with your hands." The Israelite would give it to him, and it would become blood. The Egyptian would say, "Let you and me drink from one cup." Then the Israelite would drink water and the Egyptian would drink blood. Only when the Egyptian would take the water from the Israelite with money was he able to drink water. This is how the Israelites became wealthy.⁹⁴

As noted previously, the Rabbis remarked that the magicians were able to duplicate this plague. Therefore, Pharaoh assumed that the blood was the result of common sorcery. As Exodus Rabbah 9:11 states, "'And Pharaoh turned and went to his house...' (Exodus 7:23) with no fear or impression of this plague of God." Despite this

⁹³ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 8:5.

⁹⁴ Exodus Rabbah 9:10, Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 14, Tanhuma, Va'era 13.

lack of response, the plague eventually subsided. Thus, the Bible reports, "Seven days were completed, after the Lord had stricken the river" (Exodus 7:24). Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah read this verse and disputed its exact meaning. The midrash recounts:

One of them said that God warned them for twenty-four days before the plague, and that the plague lasted for seven days. The other said that God warned them for seven days, and that the plague lasted for twenty-four days. The one who thought that God warned them for twenty-four days reasoned that "Seven days were completed" referred to the plague. The one who thought that God warned them for seven days reasoned that "Seven days were completed, after the Lord had stricken the river" referred to the warning given for another plague.

While the midrash does not convey which Rabbi held which theory, it is clear that there is a valid reason for debate. The first speaker believes that the latter part of the verse refers to an action continuous with the first part. This Rabbi, then, reads the verse as saying, "Seven days were completed after the Lord had begun striking the river." The second speaker, however, believes that the latter part of the verse refers to a completed action. This Rabbi understands the texts as saying, "Seven days [of warning for the next plague] were completed *after* the Lord had [already] struck the river." Thus, just as Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah argued over the extent of the plague, they also argue over its duration.

Frogs

After the first plague had subsided, God commanded Moses to warn Pharaoh that if he still refused to let the Israelites go free, God would unleash the second plague upon the Egyptians: the frogs. When it became clear that Pharaoh would not heed this admonition, Aaron was ordered to stretch his rod over the waters in order to evoke the

frogs' presence. The text reads, "And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frog came up and covered the land of Egypt" (Exodus 8:2). The Rabbis viewed this particular verse as problematic, since it refers to the frogs in the singular form: צפרדע. For how could one frog cover the entire land of Egypt? There are several midrashim that attempt to reconcile the difficulties presented in the text.

Tanhuma offers one explanation for the word "frog" appearing in the singular form. The passage begins by presenting the textual difficulty. The midrash reads, "It is written in one verse, 'The river will swarm with frogs,' and it is written in another verse, 'The frog came up.' Rabbi Akiba said that there was one frog, but the Egyptians would beat it and many frogs would spring from it."⁹⁵ It is very telling that this midrash holds the Egyptians responsible for the increasing number of frogs. By doing so, it suggests that the Egyptians were accountable not only for the necessity of the plague, but also for its extent.

A similar midrash is found in Exodus Rabbah 10:4. This midrash also portrays Rabbi Akiba as a concerned interpreter of this text. In this account, Rabbi Akiba suggests, "There was one frog, but it bred and filled up the land of Egypt." However, Rabbi Akiba is not the only sage to be quoted. On hearing this explanation, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah admonishes, "Akiba, What business is it of yours to deal with *aggadah*? Cease your teachings and go study Neg'aim and Ahiloth. There was one frog and it called for others to come."⁹⁶ From this exchange, we learn that Rabbi Akiba's interpretation was too farfetched for Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah. It is possible that his objection stemmed from the fact that it is inconceivable that a frog would naturally breed

so quickly. Had Akiba's theory been accurate, the Egyptians would have had to acknowledge the miraculous nature of the plague. Yet, according to the biblical text, the Egyptians did not recognize the plagues as a sign of God's power until the lice. Therefore, the other frogs had to derive from another source.

Seder Eliyahu Rabbah offers a third version of this theme. This text blends aspects from the other two midrashim. Like the Tanhuma passage, it cites Rabbi Akiba as attributing the frogs' multiplying to the Egyptians' beatings. Like the Exodus Rabbah passage, it includes Rabbi Eleazar's protests against Rabbi Akiba's interpretation. However, in this midrash, Rabbi Eleazar's alternative is quite different from the one cited in Exodus Rabbah. Rather than offering another physical interpretation of how one frog became many, here Rabbi Eleazar comments that the singular form of the word "frog" is to be understood metaphorically. Thus, Seder Eliyahu Rabbah reports:

Rabbi Akiba states that there was one frog, but the Egyptians would hit it with a stick. Then many frogs would drop from it (the original frog) until the entire land of Egypt was filled with frogs. Rabbi Eleazar the Modite said, "What business is it of yours to deal with *aggadah*? Cease your teachings and go study Neg'aim and Ahiloth. "The frog (הצפרדע) came up" [refers] to the intelligence (דיעה) that the [frog] possesses. When birds (commonly called צפורים in Hebrew, though this source employs the word עופות) are thirsty and come to drink water from the river or from the lakes, the frog calls to them, "Come and drink. Don't be afraid."⁹⁷

Regardless of the discrepancies over how the midrashim explain a singular frog's becoming many, one thing is certain: once the frogs established themselves as taking over

⁹⁵ Tanhuma, Va'era 14.

⁹⁶ Exodus Rabbah 10:4.

⁹⁷ Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 8:7.

the Egyptian land, there was no escaping their comprehensive presence. There are numerous rabbinic passages that describe the vastness of the frogs' infestation.

In Exodus Rabbah 10:3, Rabbi Aha comments on the phrase, "The frogs shall come up upon you (Pharaoh)" (Exodus 7:29). He states, "From this it is seen that when he (Pharaoh) would drink water and one drop of that water would go down to his heart, it would become a frog and would fix itself there." Thus, the frogs did not only appear on the land, but also inside a person's very being. Rabbi Yohanan added Rabbi Aha's statement, "Wherever there was a bit of dust and a drop of water would touch it, it would become a frog." This statement seems to allude to the land's swarming with frogs. According to Rabbi Yohanan, this was because the land actually turned into frogs. However, this understanding of the frogs' origin could raise some pertinent questions. Therefore, on hearing this interpretation, Hezekiah bar Rabbi asked, "Even according to this view, were not the nobles' houses that were made out of marble and stone affected, too?" This question refers to the statement in Exodus 7:28, "...and these will go and come into your house, and into your bedchamber, and upon your bed..." In light of this, Hezekiah bar Rabbi responds, "This, then, teaches that a frog would rise up from the deep and say to the marble, 'Make room for me so that I can go up and perform the will of my Creator.' Then the marble would break and the frog would go up and take their private parts and mutilate them." This last comment about the mutilation is based on a *gezerah shavah* involving the root שחח. In reference to the plagues, Psalm 78:45 alludes to "the frogs that destroyed (השחיתם) them." In Leviticus 22:25, it is written, "There is a blemish (משחתם) in them." The Rabbis understand this "blemish" as a type of emasculation of animals that would make them unfit for sacrifice.

There are other midrashim that comment on the frogs' mutilation of Egyptian bodies. For example, Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 8:6 states, "The Holy One brought frogs upon them until their voices could be heard from within the Egyptians' abdomens, saying 'Measure for measure.'⁹⁸ Moreover, when the Egyptians would go to the bathroom, a frog would come out of them and would bite them on their orifices/genitals. There is no greater shame than this. As it is written, 'And the river shall swarm with frogs... and the frogs shall come up in you, and in your people' (Exodus 7:28-29)." This midrash takes the verse quite literally. Rather than translating **וּבְכֶה וּבַעֲמֶךָ** as "upon you and upon your people," Seder Eliyahu Rabbah understands the phrase as "in you and in your people." This rendition of the text allows for an extremely graphic commentary on the havoc and pain created by the frogs.

Exodus Rabbah 10:6 likewise comments on the frogs' being inside the Egyptians' bodies. According to this passage, in addition to causing physical damage to the Egyptians, the frogs also inflicted a psychological torture. The Rabbis base this conclusion on Exodus 8:8, "Moses called out to God on account of (**עַל דְּבַר**) the frogs that [God] brought upon Pharaoh." The idiom **עַל דְּבַר** means "on account of." However, it can also be read as **עַל דִּיבּוֹר**, "because of the noise." The midrash uses this alternative reading in order to explicate the full effect of the frogs. It teaches, "Our Rabbis, may their memories be for a blessing, said that it was not enough for the Egyptians to be injured by the frogs. Rather, the frogs' voices were worse than anything else when they would enter into their bodies and croak from within. As it is said, 'On

⁹⁸ The Hebrew phrase **לְקוֹ קוֹ** sounds like a frog's croak.

account (על דבר) of the frogs that [God] brought upon Pharaoh' (Exodus 8:9). על דבר: because of the noise of the frogs."

Tanhuma also notes the extent of the frogs. Va'era 14 describes how persistent the frogs were in their mission to disturb the Egyptians. This midrash states, "When they (the Egyptians) would go to mix a drink, the cup would be filled with frogs, as it is said, 'They will go up and come into your houses... and into your kneading troughs' (Exodus 7:28). When is a kneading trough found near the oven? When the oven is hot. All this was done according to their Creator's will." This passage serves to illustrate the frogs' determination in carrying out their role in the struggle against the Egyptians. In addition to making their presence known in safe conditions, such as jumping into a cup, they also risked their lives in order to accomplish their goal by going into very hot kneading troughs.

The motif of the frogs' jumping into a fiery place is also mentioned in Exodus Rabbah 10:2. Here, the frogs are not only lauded as being diligent, but also praised as being inspirational figures. The midrash begins with a more elaborate version of the Tanhuma passage. It states, "When an Egyptian woman would knead dough and heat the oven, frogs would come and descend onto the dough and eat it. Then they would descend into the oven, cool it, and would stick to the bread. As it is written, 'in your ovens and in your kneading troughs' (Exodus 7:28). And when is the time for dough to stick to the oven? When the oven is hot." From this we learn that the frogs did much more than merely jump into the kneading troughs. Indeed, they would first spoil any effort to bake bread. It is interesting to note that this version provides an explanation of how the frogs could remain in a hot oven. According to Exodus Rabbah, the ovens did not stay hot for

very long. Since the frogs' body temperature is so cold, the ovens would quickly lose their heat. Therefore, the frogs were able to stick to the bread indefinitely.

The Rabbis believe that this logic served as a source of comfort to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, the three martyrs from the Book of Daniel. For the midrash continues, "Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah took an 'all the more so' lesson from the frogs when they descended into a fiery furnace." This is a reference to the Talmudic passage:

What [reason] did Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah see that they delivered themselves, for the sanctification of God's Name, to the fiery furnace? They argued an "all the more so" to themselves: frogs are not commanded concerning the sanctification of God's Name. However, it is written of them, "and they shall come up and go into your house . . . and into your ovens, and into your kneading troughs." (Exodus 7:29) When are the kneading troughs to be found near the oven? When the oven is hot. We, who are commanded concerning the sanctification of God's Name, all the more so.⁹⁹

Thus, knowing that the frogs did not burn in the Egyptian ovens, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were confident that they, too, would not burn.

There were several other benefits from this plague of the frogs, aside from serving as an example for Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In addition to being a source of inspiration for these three biblical figures, the frogs also influenced several prophets, according to the Rabbis. In Exodus Rabbah 10:1, the Rabbis expound on the phrase, "But the advantage (יתרון) of a land every way is a king that makes himself servant to the field" (Ecclesiastes 5:8). Rather than reading יתרון as "advantage," the Rabbis take the root (יתר) and translate it as "superfluous." Thus, the rabbinic understanding of this verse is "The superfluity of a land every way is..." This, then, teaches that every creature

– even those with no apparent reason to exist – serves some purpose. The midrash states, “Even those creatures that you see as needless in the world, such as flies, bugs, and gnats, have their role in the creation of the world. As it is said, ‘And God saw everything that was made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:31).’” This teaching is accredited as proof for reluctant prophets that God’s work will be done one way or another. The midrash claims that when a prophet, such as Moses, Jeremiah, or Jonah, would protest their calling, God would say to them, “What do you think will happen if you do not respond to my call? Do you think I have no one else to send?” The midrash continues, “‘The superfluity of a land every way is...’ means that I will cause my message to be fulfilled even by a serpent, scorpion, or frog. Know that if it had not been for the hornet, how would God have punished the Amorites? If it had not been for the frog, how would God have punished the Egyptians?” Thus, the frogs, which often appear as insignificant, irrelevant beings, demonstrate the usefulness of every creature on earth – all are God’s servants and perform His will.

The frogs are also hailed as resolving an age-old border dispute. According to the Rabbis, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians had a tradition of fighting over their respective lands’ limits. Naturally, this conflict led to a lot of strife between the two nations. Thus, the Rabbis credit the frogs as being the means of reaching conciliation. Exodus Rabbah 10:2 states, “The plagues that God brought against the Egyptians caused them to make peace with them (the Africans). How was this? ... When the frogs came, they made peace between them. When the plague affected a certain field, they (the Ethiopians) would know that this was not their land. As it is said, ‘[I will strike] all your borders

⁹⁹ Pesachim 53b.

[with frogs]' – your borders, and no one else's borders." This midrash teaches that even though the frogs disrupted the Egyptians' lives during the plague's duration, they were also the means for a long-term benefit: peace between two neighbors.

Just as the frogs established the borders between Egypt and Ethiopia, this plague also demonstrated the rightful owner of the Nile. Exodus Rabbah 10:2 notes that God said to Pharaoh, "You have said, 'The river is mine.' I will show you whether it is mine or yours. My plague will come upon it and I will decree that it bring forth frogs, just as I decreed about the waters in the beginning. I said, 'Let the waters swarm,' and they performed my commandments. So, too, will the river perform my decree." This midrash is based on the Exodus 7:28 verse, "The river will swarm with frogs." The Rabbis understood this detail as indicating God's demonstration of His ultimate and absolute ownership of that river.

Unlike the plague of blood, this plague did not end on its own. Indeed, Pharaoh entreated Moses to ask God to remove this plague. The Rabbis note that Pharaoh did so only when he himself was disturbed. Exodus Rabbah 10:5 teaches, "When the punishment began to touch his body, Pharaoh immediately felt it and started to yell, 'Beg the Lord to take away the frogs.'" Moses agreed to call off the plague, but not to remove all the frogs from Egypt. The Rabbis note that the text indicates that the frogs "may remain in the river only" (Exodus 8:5). From this, the Rabbis surmise, "They will all die, except the ones who are left in the river." This teaches that the natural balance of the ecology was restored. For it would be abnormal for a river not to contain frogs. The Rabbis reasoned that the frogs who were on the land (or in the Egyptians' cups, ovens, bodies, etc.) were the ones created for the sole purpose of executing the plague. The

frogs that remained in the river, therefore, were part of the natural habitat. These frogs, then, did not die when the plague was canceled.

The biblical text describes the frogs' death. It states, "The Lord did according to the word of Moses, and the frogs died out of the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. They gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank" (Exodus 8:9-10). In anticipation of the description of the locusts' end, in which the dead locusts are removed from the land, the Rabbis explain why God allowed the carcasses to remain in Egypt. Exodus Rabbah 10:6 explains that the frogs' dead bodies were different from those of the locusts since the former "would be of no benefit" to the Egyptians. Indeed, the frogs' stench was almost as unbearable as their infestation, and thus added to the plague's effectiveness.

Lice

There is very little written about the plague of lice in the rabbinic literature. Aside from the references to this plague in previously mentioned midrashim (see Chapter Two, as well as the beginning of this chapter), there is one small paragraph in Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 8:8.

Rather than reading the word כִּינִים as "lice," this midrash translates it more generally as "insects." Therefore, it states:

There were fourteen types of lice that the Holy One brought against Egypt, and these are they: greenies (green bottle flies), rotters (borers), leapers (fleas), dancers (chafers), hunger-makers (mosquitoes), hand-scatterers (gnats in swarms), antennaed house-bugs (horned cockroaches), antennaed field-bugs (horned grasshoppers), slow-moving ants, fast-moving ants, tarantulas,

incisers (ticks), rough stingers (yellow-jackets), and insects with basket-shaped heads (wasps).

The Rabbis based the number of the types of insects on the verse, "Aaron stretched out his hand" (Exodus 8:13). The Hebrew word for hand (יָד) is also the representation for the number "fourteen." Thus, they inferred that there were fourteen different categories of כּוֹנִים. From this one can see that the plague was much more than a lice epidemic.

Rather, it was a grotesque parade of annoying, harmful insects attacking the Egyptian people.

VI. The Second Triad: Swarms, Pestilence, Boils

Swarms

In heralding the fourth plague, God commissions Moses to warn Pharaoh, "For if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send **הַעֲרֹב** upon you, upon your servants, upon your people, and into your houses; and the houses of Egypt shall be filled with **הַעֲרֹב**, as well as the ground on which they are" (Exodus 8:17). This word **הַעֲרֹב** literally means "the mixture," or "the swarm." Therefore, one can understand that this plague consisted of a great multitude's invasion of personal space. Yet, the biblical text does not indicate what exactly comprised this swarm. Naturally, this ambiguity served as fodder for rabbinic discussion.

Rabbi Nehemiah and Rabbi Judah, the same figures who argued over the extent and duration of the first plague, are cited as debating the meaning of **הַעֲרֹב**. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Rabbi Judah sought to explain the purpose of this plague. In order to do this, he reads **הַעֲרֹב** as "swarms of wild beasts." Exodus Rabbah 11:3¹⁰⁰ reports, "They (the Egyptians) would say to the Israelites, 'Go and bring us bears, lions, and tigers' in order to oppress them. Therefore, [God] brought swarms of animals upon them. These are the words of Rabbi Judah." Upon hearing this explanation of why God had afflicted the Egyptians with **הַעֲרֹב**, Rabbi Nehemiah countered, "They were different types of hornets and gnats."

¹⁰⁰ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va'era 14.

The midrash continues with a discussion of which rendering is more appropriate to the text. The Rabbis reason, "The words of Rabbi Judah are more worthy since in the case of the frogs it is written, 'And the frogs died,' due to the fact that there was no benefit from their skins. Yet, in the case of **הַעֲרֹב**, there would be benefit from their skins. Thus, 'there remained not even one' (Exodus 8:27). If they had been hornets and gnats, there would have been a stench." The Rabbis reason that if the **הַעֲרֹב** had been a swarm of insects, once the plague was called off, their carcasses would begin to smell. Therefore, the dead bugs would have remained in the land to add insult to injury, as in the case of the frogs. However, since the text clearly states that "not even one" was left, the Rabbis conclude that this was to avoid the Egyptians' benefiting from the plague. Because of this, they tend to agree with Rabbi Judah in declaring **הַעֲרֹב** to be swarms of animals. This explains why the midrashim that deal with the plagues as a whole (see Chapter 2) understands the fourth plague to be a multitude of wild beasts.

The tension between the two interpretations of **הַעֲרֹב** is witnessed in a midrash discussing the verse, "For if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send **הַעֲרֹב**..." (Exodus 8:27). Exodus Rabbah 11:2 asks, "From where did these [swarms] come? There are those who say from above, and there are those who say from below." The midrash quotes Rabbi Akiba as giving an extremely diplomatic response, "[They come] from above *and* from below." Thereupon, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish elaborates, "The Holy One said to them (the Egyptians), 'You set a great many people over my children. Likewise, I will set upon you a great many birds of the heaven and beasts of the land.' As it is said, 'Behold I send upon you the swarm,' [meaning,] a mixture of animals and birds."

In addition to debating the meaning of the word **הַעֲרֹב**, the Rabbis were also drawn to another aspect of this plague. They note the verse, “I will separate in that day the land of Goshen, in which My people dwell, that no swarm shall be there, so that you will know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth” (Exodus 8:18). This detail of the story should not be novel to the Rabbis. For according to the midrash, the blood, frogs, and lice did not affect the Israelites, either. It seems odd, then, that the text would explicitly state the swarms’ absence in Goshen. Thus, the midrash endeavors to explain the added significance of this plague’s selectivity.

The Rabbis offer two reasons for the articulation of the Israelites’ being spared from the swarms. The first focuses on the centrality of Goshen. Exodus Rabbah 11:2 calls attention to the fact that the text does not say that God set the Israelite people apart from the Egyptians, but rather the land of Goshen. The contextual translation of the phrase **עַלֶּיהָ עָמַד עַמִּי** is generally understood as “in which my people dwell.” However, the Rabbis read this verse as “on which My people stand.” In light of this rendition of the biblical text, they reason that were it not for Goshen, the Israelites would not have been spared. Rabbi Ami compares God’s statement to a man who tells a friend, “Judgment will not fall on this man since he stands on that man (**עֹמֵד עָלֶיהוֹן**) as his patron.”

The second reason that the Rabbis offer emphasizes the following verse in the biblical account. In Exodus 8:19, God declares, “I will set a **פְּדוּת** between My people and your people.” The word **פְּדוּת** is commonly translated as “division” in regards to this verse. In the midrash, though, the Rabbis note this term’s literal meaning, “redemption.” Due to this connotation, the Rabbis comment, “This verse teaches that Israel deserved to

be stricken with this plague, but God gave the Egyptians as a ransom.” The midrash then connects this scenario with a similar case. The passage continues, “Also in the time to come, the Holy One will bring the ancient idolaters and heathens and send them into Gehenna in Israel’s stead. As it is said, ‘For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your stead’ (Isaiah 48:3).” This midrash is noteworthy in that it implies Israel’s culpability. Rather than perceiving Egypt as the ultimate and sole bearer of evil, Israel is portrayed as also deserving punishment. However, God’s special nation is spared at a more wicked people’s expense.

Pestilence

A distinction between the Israelites and Egyptians is also noted in regards to the fifth plague. In describing the impending pestilence, Moses warns Pharaoh, “The Lord will separate the cattle of Israel from the cattle of Egypt, and nothing shall die of all that belongs to the children of Israel” (Exodus 9:4). This detail caused the Rabbis to wonder why it was included in the biblical narrative. As mentioned in regard to the swarms, it should have been a given that the Israelites were spared from the plagues. Therefore, the Rabbis strive to find the deeper message of this verse.

In the case of the swarms, the Rabbis understood the overt distinction between Egypt and Israel as indicating the latter’s culpability: like Egypt, Israel deserved to be punished also, but was spared. Thus, a qualitative inference is drawn. In the case of the pestilence, however, the Rabbis view the verse as describing the extent of the plague. Here, a quantitative inference is made.

Exodus Rabbah 11:4 asks, "What is the significance of 'And nothing shall die of all that belongs to the children of Israel'?"¹⁰¹ This indicates that even if an Israelite had a partial claim to cattle that was in the hands of an Egyptian, it was saved. By this they knew the judgments of Israel... Even cattle that was half Israelite and half Egyptian did not die." This midrash echoes a theme found also in connection with the frogs. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the benefits of the second plague is that it clarified a border dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia.¹⁰² This dispute was settled by virtue of the frogs: if a piece of land had frogs on it, it belonged to the Egyptians. If a piece of land did not have frogs on it, it belonged to the Ethiopians. Similarly, any argument over the ownership of cattle was determined by virtue of the pestilence: if an animal died, it belonged to an Egyptian. If an animal lived, it belonged to an Israelite.

There are few other rabbinic traditions regarding the pestilence. The only other midrash of note on this subject is found in relation to the frogs. Exodus Rabbah 10:2 investigates the verse, "And if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will strike all your borders with frogs" (Exodus 7:27). Rabbi Joshua ben Levi explicated, "Each and-every plague that came upon the Egyptians in Egypt was accompanied by pestilence. As it is said, 'Behold (הִנֵּה) I will strike.' This 'behold' refers to the pestilence, as it says, 'Behold (הִנֵּה) the hand of the Lord is upon your cattle' (Exodus 9:3)." This midrash reveals the Rabbis' fascination with the repetition of seemingly superfluous words. The term הִנֵּה represents such an instance. Rather than reading it as a mere exclamation, the Rabbis deem the term as an indication of something more. Indeed, they glean from its use that the Egyptians had already experienced some form of pestilence.

¹⁰¹ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va'era 14.

Boils

As mentioned earlier, the Rabbis perceived the boils as constituting the only plague to be performed by all three agents: Moses, Aaron, and God.¹⁰³ This is based on the biblical description of this sixth plague. The text relates that God told both Moses and Aaron, "Take for yourselves handfuls of soot of the furnace, and let Moses sprinkle it heavenwards in the sight of Pharaoh. And it shall become small dust in all the land of Egypt, and shall be a pox breaking out in boils upon man and upon beast" (Exodus 9:8-9). Thus, Moses and Aaron were responsible for gathering the raw materials, and God was responsible for converting them into the dust, which would result in the boils.

The Rabbis were intrigued by this description. Not only did it reveal the cooperation of all three parties in inducing the plague, but it also suggested a remarkable phenomenon. Both Moses and Aaron took handfuls of soot, but only Moses threw them towards heaven. It is possible to interpret the verse as suggesting that Moses first released his own handful of soot and then took Aaron's handful and threw that soot toward heaven. It is also feasible that Moses took his handful in one hand, and Aaron's handful in his other hand. As practical as these two theories may be, the Rabbis qualitatively reject them both. The Rabbis understand the verse as relating a great miracle. Exodus Rabbah 11:5 states, "Moses and Aaron both filled their hands, and Moses's hand held not only his handful of soot, but also Aaron's handful of soot. From here we learn that the lesser can contain the greater." Since Moses was younger than Aaron, he is referred to as the "lesser" in this midrash. Yet, the Rabbis note, although he

¹⁰²Exodus Rabbah 10:2.

¹⁰³ as explicated in Exodus Rabbah 12:4.

might be lesser in years, he is not necessarily lesser in ability. This miracle, then, serves as a reminder not to judge one's capabilities based on age.

Indeed, Exodus Rabbah 11:5 notes two other "great" miracles that can be discerned in regards to the boils. The first is noted by Rabbi Joshua ben Levi. He taught, "When a man throws an arrow upwards, it cannot go 100 cubits. Yet, Moses threw a handful of soot of a furnace – a thing that has no substance – and threw it toward heaven until it reached the holy throne." This midrash reveals the Rabbis' basic understanding of physics. It is easier to throw something that has some weight to it than something that is extremely light. This can be illustrated by comparing a baseball to a balloon. Thrown with the same force, a baseball will travel much farther than a balloon will. With this in mind, it is reasonable to assume that an arrow would reach farther heights than a handful of dust. Yet, in the account of the boils, we learn that the handful of dust released by Moses reached much greater heights than any arrow could ever achieve. This, according to the Rabbis, constituted a miracle.

The second miracle concerns the nature of the dust itself. The Rabbis note, "If a man scatters one *kav* of dust, it won't spread more than four cubits. Yet, Moses took a handful and scattered it over the entire land of Egypt."¹⁰⁴ This miracle emphasizes the special God-given abilities of Moses. Were anyone else to release the dust, it would have settled in the general area of that individual. Moses, though, was successful in throwing the dust so that it not only reached heaven, but also spread throughout all of Egypt. The Rabbis did not infer from this that Moses had an especially strong arm. Rather, they saw

¹⁰⁴ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va'era 14. The only variation in this version is its defining Egypt's area as "four hundred by four hundred parasangs."

this as proof that God had performed a miracle by causing Moses to throw the dust in such a comprehensive fashion.

The Rabbis were not only interested in how the boils were performed, but also in the form of the boils. After all, if the plagues grew in increasing severity, the boils must have been something more painful than mere body rashes. To answer this query, the Rabbis look to the phrase, “breaking out (פֹּרֵחַ) upon man and upon beast” (Exodus 9:8-9). The word פֹּרֵחַ caught the Rabbis’ attention, since it could be read as an indication of the intensity of this plague. Exodus Rabbah 11:6 comments, “What is the meaning of פֹּרֵחַ? It teaches that they (the Egyptians) were struck with leprosy along with this (the boils). As it is said, ‘If the leprosy should break out (פֹּרֵחַ) in the skin...’ (Leviticus 13:12).” Based on *gezerah shavah*, the Rabbis infer from the use of the word פֹּרֵחַ that the fifth plague was comprised of not only boils, but also leprosy. The connection between the boils passage and the leprosy passage that is cited in the midrash is even more apropos due to the fact that just a few verses later in Leviticus 13:18, there is another reference to שֹׁחֵן (boils). Indeed, Exodus 9 and Leviticus 13 are the only chapters of Torah where this word is found.

Another aspect of the boils account that intrigued the Rabbis is the reference to the magicians. As noted earlier (see Chapter Four), the magicians ceased their endeavors to duplicate the plagues after their failed attempt in relation to the lice. Because of this fact, it is very strange that the text states, “The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boils were on the magicians, and on all the Egyptians” (Exodus 9:11). This detail should be obvious. The magicians, after all, are included in

the larger group of Egyptians. Why, then, does the text single them out as a separate entity?

Rather than reading this verse literally (i.e., the magicians could not physically stand before Moses due to the pain from the boils), the Rabbis understood this detail metaphorically. The magicians could not stand before Moses because of their moral defeat. Exodus Rabbah 11:6 identifies two causes for the magicians' tarnished statures. The midrash teaches, "They were the ones who gave Pharaoh counsel to cast every male child into the river so that Moses should die. Moreover, they were the ones who condemned him to be killed for removing Pharaoh's crown from his head."

The Rabbis hold the magicians personally responsible for urging Pharaoh to kill Moses. Their first attempt on Moses's life is based on an earlier midrash. According to Exodus Rabbah 1:18, Pharaoh's astrologers (understood to be the magicians) knew that Israel's redeemer would soon be born. However, they did not know whether this person would be Egyptian or Hebrew. Therefore, Pharaoh ordered all male babies be thrown into the Nile, just to be safe. Of course, the Egyptians resisted this dictate for themselves, but enforced it for the Israelites. Were it not for these magicians' reports, Pharaoh would have never thought to drown these children.

The allusion to Moses's removing Pharaoh's crown from his head is a reference to another midrash concerning Moses's early years in the Egyptian palace. Exodus Rabbah 1:26 relates:

Pharaoh's daughter would kiss, hug, and love him (Moses) as if he were her son, so he was not thrown out of the king's palace. Because he was handsome, everyone desired to see him. Whoever would see him could not take himself from him. Pharaoh would kiss him and hug him, and [Moses] would take

Pharaoh's crown and put it on his own head, as he would do in the future when he would grow up... The Egyptian magicians would sit there saying, "We fear from his taking your crown and putting it on his head that this is the one whom we said will take your kingdom from you in the future." Some of them said to kill him and some of them said to burn him alive.

This midrash suggests that the magicians realized that their initial plot to take Moses's life had failed. Therefore, they attempted once again to kill him as a child, before he would have a chance to overthrow Pharaoh. Clearly, the magicians were intent on preventing Moses from threatening Egypt. When Moses returned and brought the plagues on Egypt, the magicians knew that their efforts were in vain, for their prophecy had been fulfilled: the redeemer of Israel had in fact come to liberate God's people. For this reason, the Rabbis deemed that they were unable to stand before Moses. Perhaps the eruption of boils, which is so often attributed to anxiety and stress, caused the magicians to look inward and admit their inadequacies, as well as Egypt's inevitable defeat.

Chapter VII: The Third Triad: Hail, Locusts, Darkness

Hail

Before God unleashed the hail onto Pharaoh and the Egyptians, He commissioned Moses to warn the monarch. This is nothing new in the plagues narrative. After all, God had given Pharaoh warnings regarding the blood, frogs, swarms, and pestilence. However, the admonition regarding the hail is of special interest to the Rabbis due to its particular details.

The first detail of note is the fact that Moses gives Pharaoh an indication as to when the hail will fall. The biblical text reads, “Behold, tomorrow at this time (כעת) I will cause an extremely heavy hail to rain” (Exodus 9:18). The Rabbis were intrigued by the use of the word כעת, since the word connotes an exact moment. Since the text does not elaborate on when this moment would be, the Rabbis attempted to explicate how this term fits into the narrative. Thus, Zabdi ben Levi remarked, “He (Moses) scratched a mark on the wall and said to him (Pharaoh), ‘Tomorrow, when the sun reaches here, I will bring the hail down upon you.’”¹⁰⁵

The pronouncement of when the hail will fall is immediately followed by a brief description of the intensity of this plague. The text describes the hail as “such that has not been seen in Egypt from the day of its foundation until now” (Exodus 9:18). The Rabbis are greatly intrigued by this passage. They note that while the text uses the above

¹⁰⁵ Tanhuma, Va’era 20, Exodus Rabbah 12:2, Tanhuma, Va’era 16.

phrase to convey the uniqueness of the plague, it could also serve as an indication of how things could be in the days to come. Exodus Rabbah 12:2 relates:

“Such that has not been seen,” This means that nothing like it had been seen in the world, or in Egypt. It does not say that it will not be seen in the future, as is said in regards to the slaying of the first born: “nor shall be like it any more” (Exodus 11:6). “Such that has not been seen,” but God would bring it in the future. When? In the days of Gog and Magog, as it is said, “That I reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war” (Job 38:23). Scripture also says, “I will contend with him with pestilence and with blood, an overflowing rain and great hailstones” (Ezekiel 38:23).¹⁰⁶

The Rabbis realize that the text is ambiguously depicting the uniqueness of the hail. On the one hand, the Bible describes it as something that was never experienced before. Yet, on the other hand, the narrative suggests that after the occurrence of this seventh plague, this sort of hail would again make its presence known. The Rabbis reconcile this tension by teaching that this hail would indeed fall again, but not until the time of Gog and Magog.

Tanhuma Buber 2:20 presents a slight variation of this midrash. Like the Exodus Rabbah and Tanhuma texts, this source also mentions the fact that nothing like the hail had been experienced before, but would be in the future. However, the identification of this future time is a point of debate. Rabbi Simon teaches, “In the future it (the hail) would be [brought against] the nations. It is meant for Sennacherib.” However, Rabbi Hanina argues that “it is meant for the punishment of Gog and Magog.” By including Rabbi Simon’s view, this midrash further vilifies Sennacherib by comparing him to such evil forces as Pharaoh, Gog, and Magog.

¹⁰⁶ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va’era 16.

A third detail of this warning that interests the Rabbis is the fact that God advised Pharaoh to “send now and gather your cattle, and all that you have in the field” (Exodus 9:19). Exodus Rabbah 12:2 remarks, “Come and see the Holy One’s mercy. Even in the hour of His anger, he had mercy on the wicked and on their cattle, since the plague of hail was not sent on them, but rather on the produce of the land. Moreover, he warned them that they should protect themselves and their cattle so that they would not be struck with the hail.”

According to the midrash, the Rabbis were not alone in recognizing God’s mercy. Indeed, Tanhuma Buber 2:20 teaches that Pharaoh was also aware of God’s benevolence.

Pharaoh did not say that “God is righteous” (Exodus 9:27) except in regards to the plague of hail. Why? When a man wants to fight with his neighbor and best him, he will suddenly come upon him, kill him, and take all that he had. However, the Holy One said to Pharaoh, “Send now and gather your cattle, and all that you have in the field.” At this same instant, [Pharaoh] said, “God is righteous.”

Despite this warning, there were Egyptians who neglected to bring their cattle in from the fields. Thus, the hail not only affected the produce, as was originally intended, but also took the lives of the cattle and the men who were not brought into shelter.

Exodus Rabbah 12:3 remarks, “Since the Holy One saw that they did not listen to His warning, ‘Send now...,’ He said, ‘They deserve that the hail should fall on everything.’” Thus, the biblical narrative relates that Moses proceeded to bring on the plague. The text states, “Moses stretched out his rod toward heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire went out on the land, and the Lord rained down hail on the land of Egypt” (Exodus 9:23). The Rabbis were greatly intrigued by this one sentence. It

seems that almost every phrase of this passage is the inspiration for a midrashic interpretation.

The first part of this verse, "Moses stretched out his rod toward heaven, and the Lord sent..." raised a question regarding responsibility for the plague. Though the Rabbis credit Moses as the agent of this plague, there can be no denial that he was not the one who actually caused the hail to rain down. Rather, the Rabbis believed that God acted with His heavenly court in order to send down the hail. Exodus Rabbah 12:4 teaches, "Wherever the text states '*And* the Lord,' [it implies] He and His heavenly court. As it is said, '*And the Lord remembered Sarah*' (Genesis 21:1) [means] He and His counselors. Thus, '*And the Lord sent thunder and hail*' [means] He and His counselors."¹⁰⁷

Another interesting aspect of this verse is the inclusion of thunder. After all, the plague was to be hail, not thunder. While the thunder might appear to be a superfluous aspect of the plague, the Rabbis did not see it as such. Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 21 reports, "Why [was thunder a part of this plague]? By virtue of the Torah, which was given in thunder. As it is said, '*And all the people saw the thunder*' (Exodus 20:18)." Therefore, the Rabbis understand the thunder that accompanied the plague as a foreshadowing of the Torah, which would be revealed to the Israelites at a later date.

A third point of interest is the phrase, "And fire went out on the land." In exploring this description, Exodus Rabbah 12:4 notes, "They (the Egyptians) were punished as the wicked are in Gehenna. When they would sit, they would be burnt by

¹⁰⁷ Similar midrashim are found in Tanhuma, Va'era 16 and Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 21.

hail. When they would stand, they would be burnt by fire.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, the fire was not merely a byproduct of the hail, but was also a means for indicating the severity of divine punishment.

The last part of the verse, “And the Lord rained down hail on the land of Egypt,” was another passage that puzzled the Rabbis. It would have made more sense for the text to state that God *sent* down hail. Therefore, the Rabbis ask, why use the word “rained?” Rabbi Hananya responds to this question by teaching about God’s nature. He offers, “At first, the Holy One brought rain down upon them. As it came down, it became hail... Why? Since there is no evil that dwells with the Holy One. The rain that came down became hail when the wind entered it and made it hail. As it is said, ‘And the storm wind performs His command’ (Psalms 148:8).”¹⁰⁹ According to Rabbi Hananya, the hail was an agent of evil. Since God is entirely good, it does not make sense that He would be the direct cause for evil. Therefore, God arranged for something harmless (rain) to become something evil (hail) by means of another agent (the wind).

The biblical text continues with a further description of the hail: ‘So there was hail, and fire flaring up (מתלקחת) amidst the hail...” (Exodus 9:24). The Rabbis agreed that the fire’s accompanying the hail constituted a double miracle. However, the exact physics of this double miracle was a source of contention. Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Nehemiah hold different views regarding the fire within the hail. Exodus Rabbah 12:4 recounts, “One said that it is like a split pomegranate whose seeds can be seen from without. The other said that it is like a glass in which water and oil are mixed, and the

¹⁰⁸ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va’era 14.

¹⁰⁹ Tanhuma Buber, Va’era 21.

light is lit from within.”¹¹⁰ In other words, the fire that came flared up amidst the hail can be interpreted as something contained within the hail and visible from the outside, as in the case of the pomegranate, as or two substances entirely mixed, as in the case of the glass light.

While the Rabbis do not articulate which interpretation is preferred, the latter explanation seems to be the favored one since it inspires a remarkable analogy. The midrash continues, “To what can this be compared? It is similar to two ferocious legions that would constantly fight with one another. When the king was at war, he would make peace between them and they would perform the will of the king as one [legion]. So, too, are fire and hail hostile to each other. When [God] was at war with Egypt, the Holy One made peace between them and they struck the Egyptians [as one].” Thus, the double miracle of the hail was the cooperation between rival elements for the sake of executing God’s marching orders.

Another midrash on this verse concentrates on the term **מתלקחת**. Exodus Rabbah 12:4 continues, “What is the meaning of **מתלקחת**? It is **מת לקחת** (it took a corpse). After the hail struck him [to death], the fire would take him away and burn him.”¹¹¹ This passage understands the particular verb that describes the intermingling of the hail and fire as a hint regarding the roles of both elements. Rather than working together as one body, the hail and the fire each have its own duties that are to be performed consecutively.

¹¹⁰ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va’era 14.

¹¹¹ A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma, Va’era 16.

The devastation caused by the hail was comprehensive. In addition to taking human life, it also affected animal and vegetable life. Exodus Rabbah 12:4 continues by explicating the biblical verse, "And the hail struck throughout the entire land of Egypt, all that was in the field, both man and beast; and the hail struck every herb of the field, and broke every tree of the field" (Exodus 9:25). Once again, the midrash compares this plague to a military unit. The midrash describes, "The hail would descend, make battlements, and surround their cattle so that they could not leave." Later in this midrash, the verse in question is related to a similar passage from Psalms, "He destroyed their vines with hail, and their sycamore trees with frost (בַּחֲנַמַּל)" (Psalms 78:47). Reading this verse, Rabbi Judah ben Shalom asks, "What is the meaning of בַּחֲנַמַּל? It came, it floated, it cut." By adding an aleph after the bet and transposing the het and nun, Rabbi Judah ben Shalom reads this word as an acronym that describes the hail's tactics. According to him, the hail did not violently strike the Egyptian vegetation. Rather, it gently descended and then destroyed the herbage. Rabbi Pinhas disagrees with this portrayal of the hail. He maintains, "It descended like an ax and cut the trees."

The Rabbis note a discrepancy in the biblical account of the hail's effect on the vegetation. Though the text states "the hail struck every herb of the field, and broke every tree of the field" (Exodus 9:25), it later declares, "But the wheat and the spelt were not struck, for they ripened late (אֲפִילוֹת)" (Exodus 9:31). This verse seems to contradict the previous statement. Therefore, Rabbi Pinhas and Rabbi Judah ben Shalom discussed two different ways to interpret the latter verse. Rabbi Pinhas explained, "What is the meaning of אֲפִילוֹת? That the Holy One performed miracles (פְּלִאִים) with them." Rabbi Judah ben Shalom explained, "They were late." Whereas Rabbi Pinhas thinks that the

text indicates a miracle that was performed in relation to the wheat and spelt, Rabbi Judah ben Shalom sees nothing extraordinary in regards to these crops. Because they had not ripened yet, the wheat and spelt were not hard enough to be struck down by the hail. However, Rabbi Pinhas challenges Rabbi Judah ben Shalom and asks, "Is it not written 'the hail struck every herb of the field?' And you say that it was on account of their lateness that they were not struck? Rather, the Holy One performed a miracle with them." Thus, Rabbi Pinhas maintains that the term אפילות does not indicate that the wheat and spelt were spared because they were late, but rather because of a miracle (פלאים). Otherwise, the text would have never said that the hail struck every plant of the field¹¹².

Another discrepancy in the text is in regard to the extent of the plague. While the text states that the hail struck the entire land of Egypt, it also remarks that the land of Goshen was spared. The narrative states, "Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail" (Exodus 9:26). This verse is reminiscent of the description of the swarms. In regards to the fourth plague, the Rabbis believed that the Israelites were spared from pain because Goshen stood by them as their patron.¹¹³ However, in the case of hail, the Rabbis maintain that Goshen was spared because of Israel's presence. Exodus Rabbah 12:4 explains, "Why was [Goshen] rescued? Because her patron stood by her." Thus, the Rabbis viewed the relationship between Goshen and the Israelites as reciprocal. At times, Goshen would protect the Israelites; at other times, the Israelites would protect Goshen.

¹¹² Exodus Rabbah 12:6, Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 22, Tanhuma, Va'era 16.

¹¹³ Exodus Rabbah 11:2.

When Pharaoh saw the devastation that the hail wreaked, he called for Moses and Aaron to pray to God in order that the plague might cease. Pharaoh declared, "Entreat the Lord that there be no more mighty thunderings and hail; and I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer" (Exodus 9:28). There are various midrashim that deal with this verse. According to Tanhuma, Moses initially doubted Pharaoh's words. The midrash states, "Moses said to him, 'You spoke this way during the first plagues, and I prayed [for the plagues to end], but you did not send them away. Why should I pray for you and your servants?' Pharaoh answered him, 'I sinned against the Lord your God and against you. Now I will send them away.' When Moses heard this, 'Moses went out from Pharaoh and from the city and spread his hands toward the Lord... and the rain stopped pouring upon the earth' (Exodus 9:33)."¹¹⁴

Exodus Rabbah 12:5 portrays Moses as much more reticent to accommodate Pharaoh's wishes. This midrash cites Moses as saying to Pharaoh, "When I leave the city, I will spread my hands..." (Exodus 9:29). The Rabbis teach, "From this we learn that Moses did not want to pray in Egypt because it was polluted with idols and abominations." Furthermore, this midrash maintains that Moses did not believe Pharaoh's admission. It continues, "'But as for you and your servants, I know that you will not yet fear the Lord God' (Exodus 9:30). [Moses said,] Do not think that I do not know what you will do in the future after this. Rather, I know that you will not fear God after this, just as you did not fear Him before this. However, I will do this so that you will recognize the greatness of the Holy One." According to this passage, Moses had reluctantly agreed to pray on behalf of Pharaoh as long as he was outside of Egypt's city

¹¹⁴ Tanhuma, Va'era 16. A similar midrash is found in Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 22.

limits. Nonetheless, the Rabbis believe that Moses actually offered his prayer from inside Egypt's city limits. They base this on the verse, "And Moses went out of the (את) city from Pharaoh" (Exodus 9:33). The unusual use of the term את (rather than the customary מן) indicates that Moses had not really left the city's boundaries. Therefore the Rabbis comment, "He was still within the city, but did not delay in praying for them. He spread his hands toward the Lord, and the Holy One received his prayer."¹¹⁵

Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 22 elaborates on the theme of God's accepting Moses's prayer. This midrash exclaims, "See how dear the righteous are before the Holy One! Anything that they decide to do, the Holy One does." The Rabbis reason that the only reason that God ceased the hail was because Moses had asked Him to do so. In relating Moses's favored status, the Rabbis compare him to a later figure. The midrash continues, "Our Rabbis have said that once Honi the Circle-Maker was praying that rain should fall. He drew a circle and stood in it. He said, 'Master of the World, Your children put their faith in me, and behold I am like a house-child before You. I swear by Your great name that I won't move from here until you have mercy upon Your children.' Immediately, rain fell. If Honi the Circle-Maker, who was from the children of children of Moses could do this, all the more so could Moses do so himself."

The biblical text states that when Moses issued his prayer, "the thunders and hail ceased, and the rain stopped pouring upon the earth" (Exodus 9:33). The Rabbis read this verse and determine that the reason why the "rain stopped pouring upon the earth" was that it was suspended in mid-air. With this in mind, Tanhuma, Va'era 16 asks, "When will it fall?" The midrash responds, "In the days of Joshua [it will fall] on the Amorites,

¹¹⁵ Exodus Rabbah 12:7.

as it is said, 'And the Lord sent down great stones upon them' (Joshua 10:11). The rest [of the hail] that was in heaven will descend on Gog and Magog in the days of the Messiah."¹¹⁶ This midrash claims that in addition to the hail, the thunders were also suspended mid-air. Thus, the logical question is posed, "When will they descend? In the days of Elisha against the Aramean camp, as it is said, 'And the Lord caused the Aramean camp to hear the sounds of the chariot and the sounds of the horse' (2 Kings 7:6)." This midrash echoes the previous midrashim that portray the hail as unique in its own day, but as sure to return in the future. According to this last passage, this description is taken quite literally. For not only will a *similar* hail be experienced again, but the *exact same* hail is destined to return to earth in order to execute God's will.

Locusts

The Bible does not mention the locusts until Exodus 10:4, "For if you refuse to let My people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your border." Though this is the first overt reference to the eighth plague, the Rabbis believe that there is a previous, more subtle allusion to the locusts in the text. Exodus Rabbah 13:4 notes that God had told Moses that He had hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to manifest the signs "so that you may tell in the ears of your son, and of your son's son, what things I have done in Egypt..." (Exodus 10:2). From this, the Rabbis deduce, "The Holy One revealed to Moses what plague he would bring upon them, and Moses wrote 'so that you may tell in the ears of your son' as a hint. This is the plague of the locusts, as it is said, 'Tell your children about it' (Joel 1:3)." This passage from Joel introduces an account of

¹¹⁶ Similar midrashim are found in Exodus Rabbah 12:7 and Tanhuma Buber, Va'era 22.

devastation inflicted by locusts. The text continues, "That which the cutting locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten; and that which the swarming locust has left, the hopping locust has eaten; and that which the hopping locust has left, the destroying locust has eaten" (Joel 1:4). The Rabbis note the similarities between the Exodus and Joel verses. They do not regard the texts' shared references to "telling your children" and locusts as coincidence. Rather, in the tradition of *אין מוקדם ואין מאוחר בתורה* (there is no "earlier" or "later" in Torah), the Rabbis hold that Moses's use of the phrase "so that you may tell in the ears of your son" was a cryptic clue regarding the ensuing plague's identity.

The next point of interest to the Rabbis in the text is evident in Moses's warning to Pharaoh. Moses tells Pharaoh that if he does not liberate the Israelites, "tomorrow I will bring locusts into your border" (Exodus 10:2). The specific reference to "your border" suggests that the locusts' placement within Egypt's boundaries served a distinct role. Exodus Rabbah 13:4 teaches, "What is the meaning of 'Behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your border?' [It suggests that the locusts] would not be in the border of the children of Ham. And so it is said, 'For when Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness' (Isaiah 26:9). For it was by means of the plague of the locusts that they recognized the scope of Egypt's border." In other words, because the locusts would only be brought into the land of Egypt, the bordering nations (Put, Ethiopia, and Canaan) would be able to identify where their countries ended and Egypt began. This midrash echoes a previous midrash regarding a similar border dispute.

In explicating the location of the frogs, the Rabbis likewise noted that these creatures served to teach the Egyptians and Ethiopians where their respective borders were.¹¹⁷

After Moses delivered the warning to Pharaoh, “he turned and went out from Pharaoh” (Exodus 10:6). This detail is unique to the locust account. Up to this point in the narrative, the text had not stated that Moses actually left Pharaoh’s presence after delivering each of the previous warnings. Thus, the Rabbis deem this detail as revealing something special about the scene. Exodus Rabbah 10:4 teaches that when Moses pronounced the admonition of the locusts, he “saw that they had turned to each other and believed his words. He left them so that they might take counsel regarding how to repent.” By reading the verse in this light, the Rabbis anticipate Pharaoh’s servants’ stance toward the Israelites at this point in the narrative. The biblical text reports that after Moses had left, the servants pleaded, “How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God; don’t you know by now that Egypt is destroyed?” (Exodus 10:7). Despite the fact that Pharaoh was unmoved by Moses’s words, his advisors did in fact believe what Moses had said. By suggesting that Moses was aware of this dynamic, the Rabbis add to the flow of the narrative.

An additional indication that Pharaoh had the opportunity to repent is the fact that the plague afflicted Egypt the day after it was invoked. The text states, “So Moses stretched out his rod over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day, and all that night; and when it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts” (Exodus 10:13). The Egyptians had a further warning of this plague. For they felt the imposing winds a full day before the locusts arrived. The Rabbis teach that the

¹¹⁷ Exodus Rabbah 10:2.

reason for this additional time between the warning and the manifestation of the plague is “so that they might be penitent and perform atonement.” Even though God had hardened Pharaoh’s heart, the midrash purports that the Egyptians were still capable of repentance, had they been willing to admit their folly.

Despite this opportunity to repent, the Egyptians failed to heed the warning regarding the locusts. Therefore, the locusts invaded the land and destroyed “every plant of the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left” (Exodus 10:15). When Pharaoh had suffered enough of this plague, he called for Moses and Aaron and confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you” (Exodus 10:16). His admission is revealing in that Pharaoh explicitly states against whom he has sinned. The Rabbis therefore elaborate on Pharaoh’s speech. According to Exodus Rabbah 13:6, the ruler explains, “‘I have sinned against the Lord your God’ by not releasing the Israelites, ‘and against you’ by banishing you from my presence, as well as intending to curse you when I said ‘Let the Lord be so with you.’” This last detail refers to Pharaoh’s response to the request to take all the Israelites (not just the men) in order to hold a feast to the Lord. Whereas Pharaoh did not give much weight to God’s wishes before the locusts, he now recognized his foolishness while in the throes of the plague.

Upon hearing Pharaoh’s plea for respite, Moses prayed to God in order that the locusts might depart from Egypt. It is fitting that the locusts were therefore swept away with a strong sea wind (understood to be a west wind), since they entered by means of the east wind. The text relates, “And the Lord turned a very strong sea wind, which took away the locusts, and cast them into the Sea of Reeds; not one locust remained in all the borders of Egypt” (Exodus 13:19). This description is quite vivid in conveying the total

removal of the locusts. The Rabbis attribute this to God's refusal to allow the Egyptians to benefit from the plague. Rabbi Johanan explains, "When the locusts came, the Egyptians were happy and said, 'We will gather them and fill barrels with them.' The Holy One said, 'Evil ones! You find happiness in a plague that I have brought upon you!' Immediately, 'the Lord turned a very strong sea wind.' This is the western wind."¹¹⁸ It is interesting that this midrash attributes the end of the plague to the Egyptians' attitudes rather than Moses's prayers. According to this interpretation of the events, it seems that God realized that his plague had not worked as He had planned. Thus, he cut it short so that the Egyptians would no longer have reason to rejoice. In fact, Rabbi Johanan teaches that God was so adamant in vanquishing the Egyptians' joy that "even those [locusts] that had been pickled in their pots and barrels flew off and left them." Although the Egyptians had hoped to derive some benefit from the locusts, they were utterly denied any prospect to profit from them – even when the locusts had already been prepared for consumption.

Darkness

The penultimate plague, darkness, is an extremely murky subject. According to the Bible, this darkness was unlike any ordinary occurrence. In addition to affecting the sense of sight, this plague also affected the sense of feeling. After all, this was a "darkness that could be felt" (Exodus 10:21). Because this was such an unusual form of darkness, the Rabbis wondered about its origins. They reasoned that it could not have

¹¹⁸ Exodus Rabbah 13:7 and Tanhuma, Va'era 14.

derived from the natural world. Therefore, the midrash presents two views on the possible sources of this blackness.

Rabbi Judah teaches that this darkness came from up above. He bases this on the verse, "He made darkness His hiding place, His shelter surrounding Him" (Psalms 18:12). This midrash most likely notes that God had commanded Moses to stretch his hand toward "heaven" (Exodus 10:21). Therefore, it would be logical that heaven be deemed the source of the plague. Rabbi Nehemiah, however, thinks differently. He teaches that this darkness derived from Gehenna. The prooftext for this theory is, "A land of thick darkness, as darkness itself; a land of the shadow of death, without any order" (Job 10:22). This second proposition appears to base its logic on the nature of the plague. Whereas the heavenly darkness represents Godliness, the darkness from Gehenna embodies the chaotic, ominous scenario presented in the Exodus account.

The idea that the darkness came from Gehenna sparked further discussion regarding the nature of the Egyptians. According to the Rabbis, the magic that was practiced in this land was black magic. Therefore, darkness was nothing new to the Egyptians. Exodus Rabbah 14:2 remarks, "Woe to the house that has windows open to darkness. As it is said, 'And where the light is as darkness' (Job 10:22). Their light was sent from darkness." This passage draws a parallel between Gehenna and Egypt. In both places, everything that would appear to be light is actually a form of darkness. The midrash continues with another proof that the darkness came from Gehenna. Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi presents his argument, "With what are the wicked covered in Gehenna? With darkness. Hezekiah said, 'With what does one cover a tub? With a clay utensil of its kind. Just as it (the tub) is [made of] clay, so should its cover be of clay. So it is with the

wicked. As it is said, 'And their works are in the dark' (Isaiah 29:15). Therefore, the Holy One covered them with the deep, that is darkness. As it is said, "Darkness was on the face of the deep' (Genesis 1:2). This speaks about Gehenna, that the darkness that came on the Egyptians was from Gehenna."¹¹⁹ In addition to commenting on the darkness itself, this midrash also speaks about the Egyptian people. Because they had so much evil in themselves, it was only fitting that they should be covered with a substance made of that same matter. Thus, the primordial muck that had covered the unstructured universe was called upon to visit this wicked nation.

The intensity of the darkness was a further subject of discussion among the Rabbis. The biblical text describes this plague as a "darkness that could be felt," as well as a "thick darkness" (Exodus 10:21, 22). These phrases cause the Rabbis to wonder, "How thick was the darkness?" According to the midrashic tradition, "It was as thick as a *dinar*, as it is said, 'Darkness that could be felt,' that it had substance."¹²⁰ The Rabbis understood the thick darkness as something literal – something that could be measured. By comparing the darkness to a coin, the midrash draws a picture to which people could relate. The idea of being surrounded by a tangible substance as thick as a *dinar* was sure to illustrate the terror felt by the Egyptians. For this darkness not only impeded sight, but also movement.

Rabbi Abdimi of Haifa had a different view of the meaning of the "thick darkness." Rather than attempting to find an analogue of its density, he taught, "The darkness doubled and redoubled."¹²¹ This midrash relates well to another passage

¹¹⁹ The preceding midrashim are also found in Tanhuma Buber, Bo 2 and Tanhuma, Bo 2.

¹²⁰ Exodus Rabbah 14:1, Tanhuma Buber, Bo 2, Tanhuma, Bo 2.

¹²¹ Exodus Rabbah 14:3.

addressing this topic. In studying the version of this plague as presented in Psalms, the Rabbis noted the verse, “He sent darkness (שָׁחַךְ), and it was dark (וַיִּהְיֶה חָשֶׁךְ)” (Psalm 105:28). The Rabbis noticed the repeated use of the root שָׁחַךְ, darkness, and reasoned that it revealed something about the nature of the plague. They concluded, “To what is this similar? [It can be compared] to a man whose slave trespassed against him. He told someone to give him fifty lashes. That person went and gave him 100 lashes, adding his own to him (the slave). So did the Holy One, may He be exalted, send darkness upon Egypt, and the darkness added its own.”¹²² According to this midrash, the thickness is not meant as a physical description of the darkness, but rather a metaphoric representation of its intensity.

The Rabbis’ calculation of the duration of the plague also addresses the effects of the darkness on the Egyptians. While most midrashim reckon that the darkness lasted three days, there is one tradition that figures the plague endured for seven days. This is based on the fact that the Bible mentions the phrase “three days” twice. The Rabbis therefore reason:

There were seven days of darkness. During the first three days, whoever was sitting and wanted to stand could stand. Whoever was standing and wanted to sit could sit. Regarding this it is said, “And there was a thick darkness in the entire land of Egypt for three days; and they could not see each other” (Exodus 10: 22-23). [During] the last three days, whoever was sitting was not able to stand, whoever was standing was not able to sit, and whoever was lying down was not able to rise up. Regarding this it is said, “No one could stand for three days” (Exodus 10:23).¹²³

This passage teaches that the plague grew in intensity as the week progressed. Initially, the thick darkness impaired sight, but not movement. Eventually, the situation worsened

¹²² Exodus Rabbah 14:1, Tanhuma Buber, Bo 1, Tanhuma, Bo 1.

¹²³ Exodus Rabbah 14:3, Tanhuma Buber, Bo 3, Tanhuma, Bo 3.

to the point of immobility. Not only were the Egyptians blinded, but they were also paralyzed.

The preceding passage describes the first six days of darkness. The last day is described as "a day of darkness of the sea, as it is said, "And there was the cloud and the darkness, yet it gave light at night" (Exodus 14:20). So it was that the Holy One sent a cloud and darkness that gave darkness to the Egyptians, but gave light to Israel."¹²⁴ This portrayal of the darkness is reminiscent of an earlier midrash concerning the first plague, blood. Just as the water remained water for the Israelites, but turned to blood for the Egyptians, so too did the source of darkness bring obscurity for the Egyptians, but light for the Israelites.

The theory that the darkness did not affect the Israelites resulted in a midrashic tradition in which the Israelites benefitted from this plague. Exodus Rabbah 14:3 notes that earlier in the text, it is foretold to Abraham that after his descendants spend 400 years in a strange land, "they will come out with great substance" (Genesis 15:14). Thus, the Rabbis reason that the period of darkness served a larger purpose in the Exodus narrative. The midrash states:

During the three days of darkness, the Holy One gave the Israelites favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, so that they would lend them things. An Israelite would enter an Egyptian's house and would see the silver and gold utensils and clothing. If they (the Israelites) would ask for them, they (the Egyptians) would say, "We have nothing to lend you." Then the Israelites would say to them, "Behold, it is in such-and-such a place." At that moment, the Egyptians would say, "If they had wanted to lie to us, they would have taken them during the days of darkness and we would not have sensed it. Because they saw them already and did not touch them without our knowing, they will therefore

¹²⁴ Ibid. /

not hold onto them.” Thus, [the Egyptians] lent to [the Israelites].¹²⁵

This scenario is contingent on the Israelites' ability to see despite the plague's manifestation. The Rabbis find proof for this in the verse “But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.” (Exodus 10:23) The midrash finds significance in this particular phrasing of the Israelites' exemption. Exodus Rabbah 14:3 continues, “It does not say ‘in the land of Goshen,’ but rather ‘in their dwellings.’ [This teaches] that in every place where a Jew would enter, light would enter to illuminate for him what was in the barrels, boxes, and treasure-chests.” Thus, the Rabbis interpreted “*their dwellings*” as a reference to the Egyptians' homes.

While many Israelites prospered because of the darkness, the Rabbis believe that some actually suffered on account of it. Moreover, the Rabbis maintain that one reason for God's spreading darkness over Egypt was so that He could remove certain Israelites who were not worthy of redemption. According to the midrash, there were sinners among the Hebrews who did not merit being saved from Egyptian bondage. This tradition relates:

There were transgressors among Israel that had Egyptian patrons, as well as wealth and esteem. They did not want to leave. The Holy One said, “If I bring a blow against them in public and they die, the Egyptians will say, ‘Just as it passed upon us, so too does it pass upon them.’” Therefore, He brought darkness upon the Egyptians for three days in order that [the Israelites] could bury their dead and their enemies would not see them. Because of this, they should praise the Holy One.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Similar midrashim are found in Tanhuma Buber, Bo 3 and Tanhuma, Bo 3.

¹²⁶ Exodus 14:3.

This midrash is interesting on a variety of levels. Firstly, it acknowledges that not all Israelites desired to be free from the Egyptians. Indeed, some found their situation quite comfortable. However, this comfort is interpreted as sinful according to the Rabbis. If one prefers personal prosperity to communal freedom, that person is condemned. Therefore, rather than risking a scenario in which a segment of the population would resist leaving Egypt, God eliminated those who would be adverse to liberation.

Secondly, this passage indicates the tension between executing justice internally and keeping up appearances externally. While it is clear to the Rabbis that these individuals deserved to die, it is also clear that their deaths, if visible to the Egyptians, could weaken the potency of the plagues. It was vital that the Egyptians believe that they alone were being punished. Had they seen Israelites' suffering, they would not have recognized their own culpability. Rather, they would have reasoned that God arbitrarily punishes all peoples. It is also reasonable to assume that had the Egyptians witnessed the deaths of certain Israelites, there would have been tremendous embarrassment among the Israelites. Thus, God took these lives secretly.

Thirdly, the midrash emphasizes the importance of burying one's dead. That God gave the Israelite community three days to perform this mitzvah, despite the shady nature of the deceased, reveals God's merciful nature. Rather than being rushed, the Hebrews were able to take some time in this task. This teaches that even though the cause of death can be a source of shame or anger, it is incumbent upon us to execute the commandments regarding a proper burial.

It is interesting that the Rabbis use the plague of darkness as an opportunity to teach about those Israelites who were put to death. For this midrash hints at the final

plague, which will take Egyptians' lives during the dark hours. Perhaps the Rabbis are teaching us that we are not necessarily free from guilt. Just as the Pharaoh's stubbornness resulted in the Egyptian firstborns' demise, so too did certain Israelites' complacency cause their untimely deaths. Therefore, students of midrash are prepared to read the final plague with some degree of sympathy for the Egyptians who were left to bury their dead.

Chapter VIII: Death of the Firstborn

The death of the firstborn is unlike any other plague experienced. It served as the final blow to the Egyptians that moved Pharaoh to consent to the liberation of the Israelite slaves. From reading the plagues narrative, one might sense that the effectiveness of this plague was the result of an intense and progressive campaign against Pharaoh. After suffering from the first nine plagues (the water's turning to blood, the invasion of frogs, the infestation of gnats, the swarms, the pestilence, the boils, the hail, the locusts, and the darkness) it is understandable that the loss of all firstborn sons would feel like the last straw. Thus, one might suggest that Egypt had been primed to be on the brink of submission before this plague hit. Were it not for the previous plagues, Pharaoh would not have been so willing to submit to Moses's demands on behalf of the Hebrews. Though such an argument would seem to be quite logical, the Rabbis have a very different opinion regarding the efficacy of this plague.

According to the Rabbis, this last plague was so potent that it could have been fully effective by itself. Exodus Rabbah 18:5 teaches, "In the beginning when the Holy One sought to bring the plagues upon the Egyptians, He said that He would bring the death of the firstborn first. As it is said, 'Behold I will kill your son, your firstborn' (Exodus 4:23). [Pharaoh] began to say, 'Who is the Lord that I should listen to His voice?' (Exodus 5:2). The Holy One said, 'If I bring the death of the firstborn upon them first, he will send [the Israelites immediately]. Rather, I will bring the other plagues upon them first and delay this [the death of the firstborn].'" This passage teaches that the final plague was so effective that it could have accomplished the primary goal by itself. That

is, it would have motivated Pharaoh to release the Israelite slaves at once. However, when Pharaoh challenged God by asking, "Who is the Lord?" a secondary goal was established: to prove God's authority by virtue of the plagues. Therefore, this original plague was postponed so that other wonders could be manifested in order to illustrate God's unique power.

The Rabbis also believe that this final plague explicitly demonstrates God's special relationship with Israel. God's use of such a severe measure against the Egyptians reveals the favored status of Israel. Exodus Rabbah 17:5 relates the following parable in order to illustrate this point:

The Holy One and Israel are similar to a king who came with his son on the sea, when pirates' ships surrounded them. He (the king) said to them, "It is for you that my lances are prepared, that I will pass over the waves of the sea in order to fight with you." So it was with the Holy One with His children in Egypt. The Egyptian camps were plotting against them the whole night. The Holy One said to them, "Oh wicked people! You are plotting against My children. My lances are prepared." As it is said, "He saved them for His name's sake." (Psalms 106:8)

This midrash is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it reveals an extremely particularistic attitude toward God's feelings for various peoples. By comparing God, Israel, and Egypt to a king, his sons, and hostile pirates (respectively), the Rabbis illustrate that God's main focus is to protect Israel. Though He serves as the ultimate sovereign power, God's principal concern is the well being of His "children," Israel. Secondly, this midrash comments on God's urgent drive to protect Israel. Just as the king was ready to cross the waves of the sea in order to best the pirates, so too is God willing to descend upon earth in order to execute judgment against the Egyptians. There is no waiting for the enemy to approach and carry out the attack on the intended victims.

Indeed, the mere plotting of evil intentions is reason enough to warrant God's action against this hostile group.

Reading this parable, one would assume that God acted directly on behalf of the Israelites' situation. After all, God is portrayed as a concerned parent who crosses over a tumultuous sea in order to preserve his children's safety. Yet, the Rabbis disagree over the accurateness of this description in regards to executing the last plague. Earlier in the Exodus Rabbah passage, the midrash examines the verse, "For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians." (Exodus 12:23) The Rabbis comment, "There are some who say [this was done] by an angel. There are others who say the Holy One, Himself, [did this]." While this midrash presents the ambiguity, it does not resolve the matter. Thus, it is up to the imagination of the readers to determine which agent carried out this plague. Another midrashic tradition, however, does explicitly state which power is deemed responsible for the death of the firstborn. Tanhuma, Bo 7 bases its judgment on the verse, "And it came to pass that at midnight the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 12:29) The Rabbis note, "It was the Lord, Himself, and not through an agent." This teaching serves not only to emphasize God's role in this plague, but also to excuse Moses, here referred to as God's agent, from any responsibility for the death of the firstborn. This plague can not be attributed to vengeful, human-imposed genocide. Rather, it is unquestionably a divine action against a wayward people.

This biblical verse is the impetus for a multitude of midrashim that explore the significance of *בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה*, "midnight." No other plague is announced with such precision regarding its time. While the hail is referred to as arriving "tomorrow at this time." (Exodus 9:18), we, the students of Torah who did not live during that scenario, are

left with very little idea as to exactly when that plague occurred. In contrast, all generations – past, present, and future – will know when the Egyptian firstborn perished. The Rabbis were aware of this remarkable detail in the narrative, and expounded upon it in a variety of ways.

One theme of the midrashim concerning the “midnight” reference connects Exodus 12:29 with Psalms 119:62, “At midnight (בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה) I will arise to thank You.” This latter statement was understood to have been David’s words¹²⁷, describing his gratefulness to God “because of they righteous judgments.”¹²⁸ Because of the shared usage of the word “midnight,” the Rabbis believe that the subjects of the two biblical passages can be related to one another.

Tanhuma Buber 3:16 begins by exploring the possibility that David’s song could have been in reference to God’s enabling his great-grandmother and great-grandfather (Ruth and Boaz) to meet each other without giving in to their “evil inclinations.” This is based on the passage that describes how Boaz awoke “at midnight” (בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה) only to find that Ruth was lying beside him. Despite his urge to engage in sexual relations with her, God granted Boaz the ability to maintain their purity. After explaining how this meeting could be the subject of David’s thanks to God, the midrash continues, “Another interpretation of ‘midnight’ is that it is speaking about the Israelites. When the Egyptians were lying on their beds, the Holy One performed their war. As it is said, ‘And it came to pass that at midnight (בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה) the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt.’” This explanation of David’s use of the term “midnight” is most likely based on

¹²⁷ The rabbis understood King David to have authored the Psalms.

¹²⁸ This is the “b” part of the Psalms 119:62 verse.

the fact that, in addition to the *gezerah shavah* of the word, the death of the firstborn could be understood as the “righteous judgments” that are mentioned in the Psalms verse.

Pesikta deRav Kahana, as well as Pesikta Rabbati, also address the subject of David’s song. In addition to suggesting that this praise could be about Ruth and Boaz, these sources explore the possibility that David was acknowledging God’s saving presence in regards to Sarah, when she was about to be taken by Pharaoh. This midrash also offers another reason supporting the likelihood that David was making reference to the death of the firstborn. The Rabbis teach, “Because of the judgments that You brought on the Egyptians in Egypt. And because of the righteousness that You did for our ancestors in Egypt when they did not possess the *mitzvot* so that they could redeem themselves through them. Rather, they had two *mitzvot*: the blood of the Passover sacrifice and the blood of circumcision.”¹²⁹ This midrash understands the phrase “righteous judgments” as alluding to two separate entities: judgment for Egypt and righteousness for Israel. God demonstrates his judgment on Egypt through the death of the firstborn. In contrast, God demonstrates his righteousness to Israel by granting them redemption. This is noteworthy since, according to the Rabbis, redemption is earned through the performance of all the Torah’s *mitzvot*. Despite the fact that the Israelites in Egypt had not experienced the revelation of the *mitzvot*, God gave them two commandments so that they could merit redemption. By fulfilling the obligation to sacrifice the Passover offering and observing the circumcision mandate, these less informed Israelites were able to bring about their divine redemption from Egyptian bondage.

¹²⁹ Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:4, Pesikta Rabbati 17:4.

Exodus Rabbah 18:2 adds to this discussion about God's judging the Egyptians and performing righteousness toward the Israelites. This midrash recounts:

"At midnight I will arise to thank You because of the judgments" You performed against the Egyptians, and [the fact that] You were righteous toward us. When was this? When Moses [said], "I will strike all the firstborn" (Exodus 12:12), some of them began to fear, and some of them were not afraid. Those who were afraid brought their firstborn to an Israelite and said to him, "Please, take this one and let him sleep with you." When midnight came, the Holy One killed all the firstborn. As for those who were given to Israelite houses, the Holy One passed between the Israelite and the Egyptian, and took the Egyptian soul but left the Israelite soul. When the Jews awoke and found the dead Egyptian among everyone... Israel began to say, "I will awake at midnight to thank You." Thus it is said, "[because of] Your righteous judgments."

This passage is fascinating in that it puts the words of Psalms 119:62 directly in the mouths of the Israelites of the Exodus narrative. Rather than David's proclaiming God's righteous justice upon contemplating this scene, this midrash suggests that David was echoing an exclamation already declared by those directly involved. Thus, the verse is more than an allusion to the death of the firstborn. Indeed, it is an affirmation of this final blow to the Egyptians.

In addition to relating this reference to "midnight" to the Psalms passage, the Rabbis find another connection between the tenth plague and David. Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:1 reports that Rabbi Tanhum of Jaffa, in the name of Rabbi Nunya of Caesarea, began his discourse by citing, "When I pondered how I might understand this, it proved too difficult for me" (Psalms 73:16). This verse is found in the context of musing about why the wicked seem to prosper. However, Rabbi Tanhum reads this verse as a commentary on the meaning of the phrase "at midnight" as it occurs in the plagues narrative. He explains that these words were stated when David said, "No creature can

establish midnight except for the Holy One. As for me, it is too difficult. Since no creature can establish midnight, except the Holy One, blessed be He, it therefore says, 'And it came to pass at midnight...' (Exodus 12:29)¹³⁰ Because human means of measurement are inherently faulty, it would be impossible for any person to plan to do something at a pre-ordained, precise moment. Because the Bible says "midnight" and not "near midnight," the Rabbis conclude that this plague of the firstborn further illuminates the nature of God as an all-knowing divine being.¹³¹

A variation of this theme is found in Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:5 and Pesikta Rabbati 17:5. These sources apply the general principle that no one but God can know the exact time of "midnight" specifically to Moses. Noting that Moses warned Pharaoh that the plague would strike "about midnight" (Exodus 11:4), Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai taught, "Moses did not know the [duration of an] *et, rega*, or *z'man* of a night. Therefore, [Moses] said, *בְּחֶצְוֵת הַלַּיְלָה*, 'about midnight.' However, the Holy One does know the *et, rega*, and *z'man* of a night. Therefore He entered [the Egyptians' homes to kill the firstborn] with hairbreadth [precision]." Clearly, Moses knew when the plague was to strike. Yet, because of human fallacy, he could not in good conscience name the exact moment. This is why he qualified his prophecy with the imprecise word "about."

Another version of Moses's use of the phrase "about midnight" is also presented in these sources. This midrash opens with the verse, "It is He that confirms the words of His servant, and performs the counsel of His messengers" (Isaiah 44:26). The Rabbis

¹³⁰ This midrash is also found in Pesikta Rabbati 17:2.

¹³¹ This midrash is virtually reiterated in Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:2 and Pesikta Rabbati 17:2. The only significant difference is that Rabbi Nehemiah, in the name of Rabbi Mani, is cited as the source.

seek to know to which servant and to which messengers this passage alludes. They reason:

“The words of His servant” – this is Moses. [The prooftext is] “My servant Moses” (Numbers 12:7) “The counsel of His messengers” – this is Moses. [The prooftext is “God] sent a messenger and brought us forth out of Egypt” (Numbers 20:16). The Holy One said to Moses, “Go tell Israel that ‘I will go through the land of Egypt in that night’” (Exodus 12:12). Moses went and said to Israel, “Thus says the Lord: About midnight, I will go out into Egypt” (Exodus 11:4). The Holy One said, “I have already entrusted Moses... Shall my servant Moses be as a liar? Rather, what Moses said regarding ‘about midnight,’ so will I [act] at about midnight.” Therefore, “And it came to pass at midnight.”¹³²

According to this midrash, God had not intended to declare a specific range of time in which the Egyptian firstborn would die. Rather, God left the timing of this ambiguous, much like the great majority of the previous plagues. However, for whatever reason, Moses became zealous in his role as emissary and promised the Israelites that the divine punishment against the Egyptians would happen around midnight. The Rabbis note Moses’s special stature in Scripture, so they reason that God would not want to injure this prophet’s reputation or authority by not doing as Moses foretold. Therefore, God consented to strike the firstborn at midnight. Thus, the Isaiah statement, “It is He that confirms the words of His servant, and performs the counsel of His messengers,” is applied to this scenario.

Another interesting aspect of this plague’s timing is its unusual nature. As far as one can tell, the other nine plagues manifested themselves during the daytime hours. It seems odd, therefore, that the general pattern would be broken, and that God would cause

¹³² Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:3, Pesikta Rabbati 17:3, Tanhuma Buber 3:17.

this last plague to occur at the darkest hour of the night. Exodus Rabbah 18:9 resolves this difficulty by citing a parable:

This can be compared to a king whose state had imposed [a heavy] servitude on the captives that came to them. He would upset [the normal fashion] of justice and kill them [the state's residents]. So, too, did the Egyptians issue decrees against Israel that enslaved them during the day and the night. They imposed men's work on women and women's work on men. Therefore, God upset [the normal fashion] of justice in regards to them and killed them at night. As it is said, "And it came to pass at midnight..." Just as He upset Sodom in the night, so He killed the Egyptians' firstborn at night. Therefore David said, "You are awful, who can stand before You when You are angry?" (Psalms 76:8).

This midrash notes the significance of the timing of this plague. The Rabbis assume that God did not arbitrarily choose to strike the firstborn at night. Rather, there is a specific reason as to why this plague was not performed during the day. Thus, the timing of this plague indicates the explosive fury that God displayed against the Egyptians' outrageous treatment of the Hebrews. The allusion and comparison to Sodom's destruction further emphasizes the lewd and sinful nature of the Egyptians' behavior.

The above midrashim discuss the execution of the final plague as recorded in the Book of Exodus. It is important to note that while this account is the primary report of the plagues, there are other biblical passages that refer to the struggles against Pharaoh. One such passage is the verse, "On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt..." (Numbers 8:17). This statement presents a subtle, yet important, divergence from the Exodus text. Rather than locating this plague's occurrence at midnight, it states that the death of the firstborn took place during the day. Since the Rabbis derived so many lessons from the fact that the tenth plague transpired at night, they had to somehow reconcile the two, seemingly conflicting, verses. Thus they reasoned, "They were struck

with the death blow in the evening; they were convulsing all through the night; and they died during the day. What is the proof for this? 'We have all died (מתנו)' is not written, but rather, 'We are all dying (מתים)' (Exodus 12:33). [That is,] continually dying."¹³³ By describing the death of the firstborn as a process that took some time, the Rabbis are able to preserve the integrity of the scriptural text, as well as their various midrashic traditions that deal with the special timing of this plague.

Although Pharaoh was unmoved by Moses's warning regarding this last plague, the Rabbis teach that other Egyptians were not so deaf to the admonition. Specifically, the firstborn of Egypt realized their impending doom. The midrash states that the eldest sons grew quite desperate as midnight drew closer and endeavored to convince those in power to send the Israelites free in order to call off the plague. Tanhuma Buber, Bo 18 relates:

Every firstborn entered his father's house and said, "All that Moses has said has come upon us. Do you not want us to live? Rather, come and let's release these Israelites from our midst. For if not, we are dead men." Their fathers replied, "Even if all the Egyptians died, they would not leave here." What did every firstborn do? They went to Pharaoh and cried out to him, "Please release this people, for because of them evil will come." [Pharaoh] said to his servant, "Go and beat them [the firstborn] on their legs." What did the firstborn do? They immediately left. Each and every one of them took his sword and killed his father. As it is said, "To the One who struck Egypt through their firstborn (בבכוריהם)." (Psalms 136:10) "To the One who struck the Egyptian firstborn" is not written here, but rather "To the One who struck Egypt through (or with) their firstborn." When they killed their fathers, the Holy One appeared to them and killed them.

The Rabbis understand the Psalms verse as a literal statement. God, Himself, only took the lives of the firstborn. However, indirectly, God also caused the deaths of

¹³³ Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:6 and Pesikta Rabbati 17:5.

other Egyptians. Because the firstborn were so anxious and angry about their seemingly senseless demise, they avenged themselves by killing their fathers.

A similar midrash is related in *Pesikta deRav Kahana* 7:7 and *Pesikta Rabbati* 17:6. According to these sources, rather than telling their sons that the Israelites are bound to stay in Egypt regardless of the firstborns' fate, the fathers reply, "Each of us has ten sons. Let one of them die so that the Israelites will not go out." At this, the sons said, "Let us go to Pharaoh. Since he is a firstborn, he will be filled with pity for our souls and let the Israelites go out from among us." The midrash then continues much as the passage from *Tanhuma Buber* relates. In concluding, however, these sources add that the firstborn killed "sixty myriads of their fathers." While both sources present similar narratives, the *Pesikta deRav Kahana*/*Pesikta Rabbati* version portrays the horrific act of the firstborn with more sympathy. Their fathers, as well as Pharaoh, not only responded contrary to how they had anticipated. Indeed, these authority figures basically told the firstborns that their lives were less important than the institution of Israelite slavery.

The Rabbis taught that no matter how much any given group protested this plague, Pharaoh did not relent. Therefore, the plague of the firstborn ensued, wreaking havoc upon the Egyptian society. The Rabbis note that the text relates, "And it came to pass that at midnight, the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne, to the firstborn of the captive that was in his dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle" (Exodus 12:29). This verse, which appears to be a straightforward account of who was affected by this plague, intrigued the Rabbis.

It is logical that this plague would take the life of the "firstborn of Pharaoh," since this ruler was explicitly responsible for the Israelite situation. However, the Rabbis did

not sense any implicit reason why the firstborn of the captive should perish on account of the Egyptians' stubbornness. Therefore, the midrash serves to teach why those who were in bondage beside the Israelites would merit such harsh punishment. There are several variations of this midrashic tradition. In Tanhuma Buber, Bo 18, the question is raised, "If the firstborn of the Egyptians sinned (perhaps in reference to the massacre of their fathers), how had the captives sinned? Rather, because they would say and rejoice, 'Let us be in slavery so that Israel will not go forth from here.' Therefore, they were killed, 'to the firstborn of the captives' (Exodus 12:29). And all the more so [does this explain] the firstborn of the maidservants, who were oppressing them."

Likewise, Exodus Rabbah 18:10 states, "[God] killed the firstborn of the captives, since one would ask another who was imprisoned in jail, 'Do you want to go forth so that the Israel will be redeemed?' He would respond, 'Let us never go forth from here in order that Israel will not go forth.'" Because of this, [God] judged them with [the Egyptians]."

Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:8 attributes this tradition to Rabbi Huna and Rabbi Aha, who taught in the name of Rabbi Eleazar, the son of Rabbi Yosi the Galilean. These Rabbis explained, "The maidservants who were chained to the millstones would say, 'It is our desire to be in bondage [so long as] Israel is in bondage.' Rabbi Yehudah ben Pazi cited an aggadic tradition [that the maidservants were referring to] Serach, the daughter of Asher, who came down to Egypt and was chained to a millstone."¹³⁴ This midrash elaborates on the maidservants' cruelty. Although they, too, were made to suffer, they did not mind as long as they could witness the Israelites' torment.

¹³⁴ This midrash is also found in Pesikta Rabbati 17:6.

These midrashim depict the captives as passive partners in Egypt's ploy to keep the Israelites in bondage. Given the choice between common freedom and common servitude, these captives opted to remain as slaves, just so that the Israelites would continue to suffer. Perhaps this is why the earlier version of this tradition in *Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael* includes the verse, "He that is glad at calamity shall not be unpunished" (Proverbs 17:5).¹³⁵ For this is exactly how the Rabbis saw the other slaves and servants: as rejoicing over the Israelites' misery, despite the fact that they shared in that same suffering.

In addition to the captives who were afflicted with the death of the firstborn, the Rabbis teach that other non-Egyptians who resided in Egypt were also struck. *Tanhuma*, Bo 7 states, "Even if a man were in another place and his son were in Egypt, he (the son) would die. How do we know that the firstborn of Cush, Put, and Lod died? As it is said, 'And [God] struck all the firstborn in Egypt (במצרים), the first of their strength in the tents of Ham' (Psalms 78:51)." Since Ham includes Cush, Put, and Lod, the Psalms version of the incident makes it clear that all firstborn children from among these three groups who were physically present in Egypt died along with their Egyptian counterparts.

Just as the Rabbis explicated the text's inclusion of the other captives, they also sought to explain why the Egyptian cattle would be stricken with this plague. *Pesikta deRav Kahana* 7:9 posed the question, "If men sinned, how did cattle sin? Rather, the Egyptians would bow down to the ram. [Therefore, God afflicted the animals] so that they Egyptians would not say, 'Our god brought this punishment upon us! How powerful

¹³⁵ *Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael*, Bo 13.

is our god that stands for itself!""¹³⁶ Although the animals did not directly play a role in Israel's continued captivity, the Rabbis claim that they had to be touched by the plague of the firstborn so that the idolatrous Egyptians would not confuse God's efforts with the false powers of their animalistic deities.

This theme is reflected in another midrash that connects the death of the firstborn with the Passover ritual. Exodus Rabbah 16:3 comments on God's command to take a lamb as the Passover sacrifice. According to the Rabbis:

When the Holy One told Moses to kill the Passover [lamb], Moses said, "Master of the World, how can I do this thing? Do you not know that the lamb is the Egyptians' god?" [As it says,] "If we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?" (Exodus 8:22) The Holy One said to him, "By your life, Israel will not go forth from here until you sacrifice the Egyptians' gods before their eyes, so that I can show them that their gods are nothing." So here we find that they did so. In that same night that God struck the Egyptians' firstborn, Israel sacrificed the Passover [lamb] and ate it. The Egyptians saw their firstborn killed and their gods sacrificed, and they could do nothing. As it is said, "The Egyptians buried those that the Lord struck, even all their firstborn, and God also judged their gods."

Clearly, the Rabbis were greatly concerned about the Egyptians' idolatrous tradition.

Therefore, the timing, as well as the nature, of the Passover sacrifice paralleled God's ultimate blow against the Egyptians. Since Pharaoh had refused God's demands to let the Israelites go free, their most treasured creatures became a virtual offering to God: the firstborn children served as a figurative sacrifice (symbolizing the Egyptians' commitment to keep the Hebrews in bondage), while the lambs served as a literal sacrifice.

¹³⁶ This midrash is also found in Pesikta Rabbati 17:6, Tanhuma Buber, Bo 18, and Tanhuma, Bo 7.

The above midrashim serve to further spell out the victims of the plague who are named in the text. However, the Rabbis understood this plague to be comprehensive. In addition to those explicitly mentioned, they maintained that many others were included in the list of victims. While the text speaks about **כל בכור במצרים**, commonly translated as the “all firstborn sons,” the Rabbis teach that those children born out of adultery, as well as firstborn daughters, were also struck. Exodus Rabbah 18:3 bases this on the verse, “And there was not a house in which there was not one dead” (Exodus 12:30). The midrash asks, “How is this possible? By counting each and every drop [of semen] that an Egyptian put into woman, or (in other words), that first drop would be the firstborn. Thus we find that all (**כל**) his children would die. Even the firstborn daughter would die.” The Rabbis believe that the use of the word **כל** indicates a more inclusive meaning of the biblical verse. While a simple, surface rendition of the text would reveal that any given family’s firstborn son perished in this plague, the rabbinic interpretation states that each and every firstborn child – regardless of marital status and gender – died.

Using similar logic, Tanhuma Buber, Bo 19 notes that it is possible for one person to have more than one firstborn child. According to this text, “An Egyptian man who marries five women has five firstborn children from them. So, too does an Egyptian woman who marries five men have five firstborn children from them. All of them died in order to fulfill what was said, “Every firstborn will die.” Therefore we learn that even if a household had a traditional firstborn child (i.e., the child of the couple who were currently married to each other), every other firstborn from other unions was also struck. As to the families that had no children at all, “The master of the house was [regarded] as

a firstborn.” Therefore, the Rabbis were able to validate the verse, “And there was not house in which there was not one dead.” (Exodus 12:30)

Pesikta deRav Kahana presents yet another version of this tradition. This text, however, is more exhaustive in providing alternatives to the traditionally regarded “firstborn.” This source teaches:

כל בכור – Every firstborn: a man’s firstborn or a woman’s firstborn; a male firstborn or a female firstborn. How is this so? If one man [has relations] with ten women and they bear ten children, we find that all of them are [each] woman’s firstborn. If ten men [have relations] with one woman and she bears ten children, we find that all of them are the firstborn [of each] man. If you come upon a house in which there is no firstborn to the man nor to the woman, how can I reconcile that “there was not house in which there was not one dead” (Exodus 12:30)? Rabbi Abba bar Aha [taught that] the head of the house would die. As it is written, “Shimri was in charge, for he was not the firstborn, yet his father put him in charge” (1 Chronicles 26:10).¹³⁷

Thus, the first part of this midrash is consistent with the passages found in Exodus Rabbah and Tanhuma Buber. While the logic and proof-text differs, the lesson remains the same. However, the following section of the Pesikta deRav Kahana is utterly unique:

It is taught in the name of Rabbi Nathan that on the day that [an Egyptian] firstborn died, there was a statue of him molded and [put] in his house. On the same day [that God struck the firstborn, the statue] was smashed, broken, and scattered. This was as hard on [the family] as was the day that they buried him. Rabbi Judan [taught that] since the Egyptians would bury their dead within their houses, the dogs entered through the sewer-pipes and dragged the firstborn from among the dead and played with them. This was as hard on [the families] as was the day that they buried them.

These grotesque embellishments on the text reveal the Rabbis’ understanding of the role of the plague of the firstborn. In addition to punishing the Egyptians “measure for

¹³⁷ Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:6, also Pesikta Rabbati 17:6.

measure,”¹³⁸ this plague was intended to induce a great wave of terror. Through the subsequent destruction of the firstborns’ statues and the mutilation of their corpses, the families were made to re-experience the horror of their child’s death as if it had happened that day. Thus, every family screamed with fresh pain at the demise of the firstborn.

Another victim of this plague, according to the Rabbis, was the group of pregnant women who were carrying their future first child. Exodus 17:5 bases this on the word *לנגוף* “to strike” (Exodus 12:23). The Rabbis reason that the use of this particular term hints at a more profound statement. By use of *gezerah shavah*, the Rabbis show how the death of the firstborn applies to fetuses and pregnant women. The midrash teaches, “*לנגוף* teaches that even the pregnant women that were ready to give birth fell miscarried and themselves died. The slayer went and destroyed all that He found. [This is based on the theory] that the term *לנגוף* is only used for pregnant women. As it is said, ‘And strike (*וַיַּגֵּף*) a woman with child’ (Exodus 21:22).”

Upon examining these midrashim, it becomes apparent that the Rabbis were interested in enumerating exactly who was touched by the plague of the firstborn. By doing so, they were able to magnify the extent of the plague in order to show the extent of God’s vengeance on the Egyptians and vindication of the Israelites. Other midrashim, though, reveal the Rabbis’ interest in commenting on who was spared from this plague. Though God promised to strike every firstborn among the Egyptians, the biblical text does indicate that some among this group were left physically unharmed.

¹³⁸ See Chapter Two.

One category of people who are spared is comprised of the Egyptians who proved to be quite virtuous. Exodus Rabbah 18:10 notes that later in the narrative, it is reported that “a mixed multitude” accompanied Israel in their redemption from slavery. Thus the Rabbis teach:

This can be compared to a king who makes a celebration for his son and kills those who hate him. The kings said, “Everyone who is happy for me can come to my son’s celebration. Everyone who hates me will be killed with the enemies.” So did God make a celebration for Israel, that they were redeemed. God said, “Everyone who loves my son can come and rejoice with him.” The virtuous that were in Egypt came and made the Passover with Israel and went up with them. As it is said, “And a mixed multitude went up with them” (Exodus 12:38). Everyone that did not want Israel to be redeemed died with the firstborn. As it is said, “God struck all the firstborn *with* Egypt (במצרים)” (Psalms 78:51).

This midrash is interesting since it speaks to two contrasting parts of the Exodus story.

On the one hand, it indicates that people who were virtuous in Egypt – that is, Egyptians who desired that Israel should be redeemed – joined the Hebrews in celebrating the Passover sacrifice and meal. Thus, it follows that any firstborn that sympathized with the Israelite plight could save himself by attending the Passover observance. Yet, on the other hand, this passage further elucidates the Psalms verse’s use of the phrase כל בכור במצרים. Rather than understanding this as “every firstborn of Egypt” or “every firstborn in Egypt,” this midrash reads the verse as “every firstborn with Egypt.” Egypt, in this case, is used as a label for anyone who actively resisted Israel’s liberation.

A more specific instance of a virtuous person’s being spared from this plague is seen in the midrashim that comment on Pharaoh’s daughter, whom the Rabbis call Batya. In fact, the Rabbis held this biblical figure in such high esteem that they attribute the “Women of Valor” poem to her. The Rabbis maintain that though the eldest girls were

not excluded from the death of the firstborn, Batya did not die during this plague, due to her valor in caring for Moses. Exodus Rabbah 18:3 explains, “Even the firstborn daughter would die, except for Batya, Pharaoh’s daughter, since it is found that she had a good advocate. This is Moses. At it is said, ‘And when she saw him that he was a good child (כִּי טוֹב)...’ (Exodus 2:2). Therefore Solomon said, ‘She perceives that her merchandise is good (כִּי טוֹב)’ (Proverbs 31:18) ‘and she rises up while it is still night’ (Proverbs 31:15). Which night is this? ‘And it came to pass at midnight’ (Exodus 12:29).” Thus, according to the Rabbis, the depiction of the woman of valor who works through the night is actually Batya, who rose on the night of the final plague to be saved along with the Israelites.

Pesikta deRav Kahana 7:7 relates a similar tradition. According to this source, Rabbi Abun said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda ben Pazi, “Batya, Pharaoh’s daughter, was a firstborn. On account of what merit was she saved? On account of Moses’s prayer. As it is written, ‘She perceives that her merchandise is good; her candle does not extinguish at night (לַיִל)’ (Proverbs 31:18). לַיִל is written (as opposed to the more common spelling לַיְלָה). As it is written, ‘It is a night (לַיִל) of watchfulness to the Lord’ (Exodus 12:42).”¹³⁹ Again, Batya is identified with the woman of valor. The midrash is able to make this connection on the basis of two cases of *gezerah shavah*. The first is the shared use of the phrase כִּי טוֹב – referring to both Moses and the woman’s merchandise. Thus the Rabbis determine that the two items are actually one: the “merchandise” of Proverbs is a metaphor for baby Moses. The second case is the similar spelling of night as לַיִל. Because this is such an unusual way to represent the word, the Rabbis deem that the text

is hinting at a significant relationship between the woman's night and the night of watchfulness. Indeed, they view the two references as indicating that same night that the plague against the firstborn hit Egypt. While all other eldest children died that night, Batya's "candle does not extinguish" – her soul was not taken by the plague.

In contrast to Batya and the other virtuous people who were spared, the text implies that Pharaoh was also left untouched by this plague. This is puzzling to the Rabbis for two obvious reasons: firstly, since he was the epitome of evil; and secondly, since he, himself, was a firstborn child. The Rabbis therefore were concerned with providing an explanation for why Pharaoh did not perish on that night.

Tanhuma, Bo 7, explains this phenomena by teaching, "Only the firstborn of Pharaoh were left to fulfill what was said, 'It was for this that I raised you up (Exodus 9:16).'" Clearly, the Rabbis sense that Pharaoh had a larger destiny in store for him. This is why his life was spared on the night of the final plague. However, Tanhuma does not reveal exactly what Pharaoh was meant to do. Nonetheless, it is to be inferred from the midrash that Pharaoh was spared in order to bear witness to God's ultimate sign: the splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the drowning of the Egyptian hosts.

A more complete picture of why Pharaoh was saved is found in Tanhuma Buber, Bo 19. The Rabbis note that Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron during the night so that they might take the Israelites and leave Egypt. Obviously, the plague drove Pharaoh to surrender. Due to their understanding of Pharaoh as a purely evil and self-centered man, the Rabbis were intrigued by this sudden, frantic act to release the Israelites as soon as possible. Thus midrash states:

¹³⁹ This midrash is also found in Pesikta Rabbati 17:6.

Pharaoh said to [Moses], "Please get up and go!" Moses responded, "Why are you so fearful?" [Pharaoh] said, "I am a firstborn, so I fear lest I die." Moses said, "Do not be afraid of this thing. You are destined for something greater than this." Do not say that Pharaoh alone was urging [the Israelites to leave]. Rather, all the Egyptians were urging [so]. As it is said, "And Egypt was urgent upon the (79) people..." (Exodus 12:33). The Holy One said to them, "By your lives, none of you will die here, but rather in the sea." Why did they not die with the plague of the firstborn, but rather the sea? Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman [said that] the Egypt came upon Israel in deceit. They said, "If we oppress them by fire, it is possible that their God will bring fire upon us from above, just as He brought on Sodom. Rather, he has promised that he would not bring another flood to the world. Come and let us oppress them by water." The Holy One said to them, "I swore that I would not bring another flood to the world. By your lives, those people (the Egyptians) have gone to the flood."

Thus, we learn that God spared Pharaoh's life only so that He could truly execute divine retribution. Since Pharaoh had ordered that the male Hebrew children should be drowned, God determined that he, himself, should drown, along with his Egyptian hosts. It is interesting to note that the Rabbis do not base this tradition on the Exodus text. Indeed, the Torah account does not comment on what happened to Pharaoh. Rather, the Rabbis glean this interpretation from reading Psalm 136:15, "[God] overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Sea of Reeds." Hence, the midrash teaches that Pharaoh, along with his hosts, perished in the sea.

This midrash is also significant in that it signifies the end-result of the plagues. Finally, Pharaoh and the Egyptians had suffered enough from God's strikes against them. The death of the firstborn was, indeed, the last straw for this people. The Rabbis explain:

"And there was a great cry in Egypt" (Exodus 12:30). Everyone came to kill Pharaoh. At that same time, "Egypt was urgent on account (79) of the people" (Exodus 12:33). They [the Israelites] were reading Hallel and Pharaoh decreed to his men, "Come and let us call to Moses and Aaron." God said to him, "You will send forth my children at night! You shall not send forth my

children at night, but rather they will go forth publicly in the middle of the day.”¹⁴⁰

Though the Egyptians withstood all other plagues, this last blow was too much to bear. The death of the firstborn resulted in a catharsis of panic in which the Egyptians sought to avenge their dead by slaying their ruler. The Rabbis thus show that they realized, on some level, that though God brought about the plague, Pharaoh was ultimately responsible. Had he relented and let the Israelites go free, there would have been no need for this horrible punishment. Confronted with his people's angry demands, Pharaoh realized that his only option was to liberate the Hebrews. The Rabbis portray him as anxiously awaiting the Israelites' departure. Indeed, if it were up to Pharaoh, the Hebrews would have left Egypt shortly after the death of the firstborn. However, this could not be. According to the midrash, God wanted to make certain that His people would not be forced out in the dark hours. Rather, Israel would leave proudly during the day, so that all could see the saving power of the Lord.

“And it came to pass that after four hundred-thirty years, even on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.”

-Exodus 12:41

¹⁴⁰ Exodus Rabbah 18:10. Similar midrashim are found in Tanhuma, Bo7.

Conclusion

As presented in the Bible, the Ten Plagues account stands as a fascinating sub-story in the larger Exodus narrative. After all, this particular episode in the Israelite saga provides readers with suspense, confrontation, violence, and a happy ending – all effective ingredients for an engaging, even satisfying, tale. Moreover, the Ten Plagues also serve a crucial part in the movement of the Exodus account. Without these divine blows, one would have no way to explain Pharaoh's change of heart. There would be no logical reason why the Israelites were permitted to leave Egypt. Furthermore, without the Ten Plagues, the Israelites would have very little concrete proof of God's might. Indeed, these plagues seem to serve a two-fold goal: on the one hand, to convince Pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves; and on the other hand, to manifest God's strength to the Hebrews in order to establish a basis for faith and trust. This can be seen in the first commandment, which reads, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:2) This verse cannot help but evoke memories of exactly how God succeeded in liberating the Israelites via the Ten Plagues. Thus, the Ten Plagues occupy a vital space in the greater biblical context, providing a bridge between two crucial moments in the Israelites' history.

For the Rabbis, however, the Ten Plagues signify much more than a motivated transition from slavery to freedom. Indeed, these sages glean important lessons for their contemporaries from this segment of Israel's history. Upon studying the midrashic literature that deals with this subject, one sees that the Rabbis identified a variety of theological themes in connection with this biblical episode.

For instance, the Rabbis note God's fairness in determining who deserves punishment. According to the midrashim on the Ten Plagues, God does not arbitrarily assign pain and suffering. Therefore, one of the main concerns of the Rabbis seems to be establishing the Egyptians as an abhorrent people, worthy of the worst form of punishment. Thus, the midrash shows that although God hardened Pharaoh's heart, the Egyptian ruler was already as corrupt and as stubborn as could be.¹⁴¹ In addition to Pharaoh's inherent wickedness, the Rabbis also portray the general population as evil.¹⁴² Thus, the blows that the Egyptians suffered were not without good cause. Likewise, the midrash maintains that those Egyptians who did repent were spared from the plagues' destruction. This can be seen in regards to the rabbinic understanding of the "mixed multitude" that accompanied Israel in the exodus.¹⁴³ Through these and similar midrashim, the Rabbis are able to teach that the Ten Plagues serve as an example *par excellence* of justified retribution.

Another lesson that the Rabbis derive from the text deals with God's system of justice. The Ten Plagues, in the Rabbis' view, demonstrate the divine logic inherent in the world. For instance, the Rabbis teach that each and every plague served a specific purpose. Rather than determining that the Egyptians should be bothered and pained by random plagues, the midrash demonstrates why God carefully chose each affliction. Some Rabbis maintain that the plagues served as military tactics,¹⁴⁴ while others believe that the plagues paralleled the tortures that the Egyptians inflicted upon the Israelites.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Exodus Rabbah 13:3.

¹⁴² Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 8:2.

¹⁴³ Exodus Rabbah 18:10.

¹⁴⁴ Tanhuma, Bo 4 and Tanhuma Buber, Bo 4.

¹⁴⁵ For example, in Tanhumma, Bo 4 and Tanhuma Buber, Bo 5.

Such traditions reveal the rabbinic opinion that God employed the particular plagues in order to bring about a fair and just form of response to Israelite suffering.

Another theme that the rabbis expound upon is that God does not inflict suffering without some sort of benefit. In addition to the obvious gain of achieving the Israelites' liberation, the midrash demonstrates other boons that resulted from the plagues. Namely, the plagues result in distinguishing certain boundaries and populations. For example, border disputes were settled by means of the frogs and locusts.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, the plagues also served to teach that Israel enjoyed a special relationship with God, by virtue of the fact that this people was left untouched by the plagues.¹⁴⁷ Thus, in addition to justifiably punishing the Egyptians, God used the plagues to educate the world regarding the physical and spiritual separation of peoples.

Clearly, aside from the literal interpretation, the Rabbis assign great significance to the Ten Plagues narrative. In addition to reading it as a crucial part of the greater Torah text, the Rabbis study it in order to elucidate deeper theological lessons about the world in which they live. By studying the midrash on the Ten Plagues, the modern reader is better able to understand both the Rabbis' interpretation of the biblical text, and their own theology. Through the midrashim, the Rabbis affirm God's omniscience, omnipotence, and fairness. Thus, the Ten Plagues do not merely serve as the vehicle for Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. Rather, they are immortalized by the Rabbis as proof for an active divine justice in the world.

¹⁴⁶ Exodus Rabbah 10:2 and 13:4, respectively.

¹⁴⁷ For example, Tanhuma Buber 2:14, Exodus Rabbah 11:4.

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