

VAERA 5781: THE PLAGUE SEQUENCE

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Is there logic behind the arrangement of the so-called ten plagues? Interpreters have observed different types of organizing principles in this narrative. The events can be seen as a sequence of five pairs: two Nile transformations, two infestations of insects, two epidemics, two crop destructions, two conjurings of darkness and death. The narrative can also be divided into three triads topped by a climactic final plague: the 1st, 4th, 7th signs begin with Moses “standing before” Pharaoh in the morning; the 2nd, 5th, and 8th start with Moses “coming before” Pharaoh; and the 3rd, 6th and 9th are unleashed without warning. One line of rabbinic interpretation divides the signs according to the instigating agent: Aaron brings about the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd signs; Moses brings about the 7th, 8th and 9th; God causes the 4th, 5th and 10th, and the 6th is created by a collaboration of Aaron, Moses and God. Interestingly, the designation “Ten Plagues” is not found in the Bible; it is a later, rabbinic appellation. In fact, most of these divine acts are called “signs,” not “plagues,” thus highlighting that they were not considered punitive, but rather the means to convince Pharaoh, the Israelites, and the reader of God’s might. Some scholars have proposed naturalistic explanations for these events: the Nile appeared red due to red sediment caused by uncommonly heavy rain, unusual flooding disturbed the ecosystem of the Nile causing a chain of events like the invasion of frogs and disease-carrying insects that made cattle ill and caused boils. **Rachel Havrelock, 21st c. USA**

Blood	דָּם
frogs	צְפַרְדֵּי
lice	כְּנִים
wild beasts	עָרוֹב
disease of livestock	דָּבָר
boils	שָׁחִין
hail	בָּרָד
locusts	אַרְבֵּה
darkness	חֹשֶׁךְ
death of firstborn	מַכַּת בְּכוֹרוֹת

Can the ten plagues be explained by a chain of natural phenomena triggered by changes in the climate and environmental disasters? Climatologists studying the climate around the suggested time of the Exodus have discovered a dramatic climate shift. By studying stalagmites in Egyptian caves, they have reconstructed a record of the weather patterns. It would have been possible for rising temperatures to cause the Nile to dry up, turning what once was a fast-flowing river and Egypt's lifeline into a slow-moving and muddy watercourse, which could perfectly explain the Nile turning to “blood.” The hypothesis states that changing color could be the result of a bloom of toxic fresh-water algae that still causes similar effects today. The algae multiply in slow-moving warm waters with high levels of nutrition and when they die, they stain the water red. This multiplication of the algae could also have set in motion the events which led to the second, third and fourth plagues - frogs, lice, and flies. The toxic algae could have forced the frogs to leave the water causing them to cover every inch of dry land and be left to perish. And without any predators to eat the frogs away, it is possible that flies and insects flourished. And what comes along with insects? Disease! Which could have afflicted both livestock and people, thereby explaining the subsequent plagues of Pestilence, which killed the majority of the Egyptians’ wild animals, and boils, which possibly, through the spread of anthrax bacteria, struck the people of Egypt. Hail, locusts and darkness could have occurred when Thera, a volcano on Santorini, exploded in one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in human history, spewing billions of tons of volcanic ash into the atmosphere. Volcanic ash can trigger hailstorms. It can also cause clouds to release their water content thereby creating the perfect atmospheric conditions for the growth of locusts. The subsequent darkness could also be attributed to this volcanic ash. Pumice, a stone made from cooled volcanic lava, has been found in excavations of Egyptian ruins despite there not being any volcanoes in Egypt. Analysis of the rock shows that it came from the Santorini volcano, providing physical evidence that the ash fallout from the eruption at Santorini reached Egyptian shores. The death of the first-born, has been suggested as being caused by a fungus that may have poisoned the grain supplies, of which the first born male children would have had first pickings and so would have been the first to fall victim. **Joe Schwarcz, 21st c. Canada**

THERE ARE TEN PLAGUES IN ALL. SOURCE ANALYSIS INDICATES THAT THE NARRATIVE IS DRAWN FROM THE J, E, AND P SOURCES, WHICH DIFFERED IN THE NUMBER OF PLAGUES AND THEIR DETAILS; NONE OF THESE DELINEATE ALL TEN PLAGUES, WHICH IS WHY THE NUMBER TEN IS NEVER STATED--THE REDACTOR OR COMPILER TENDED NOT TO ADD INFORMATION TO THE PREEXISTING MATERIAL. INDICATIONS OF MULTIPLE SOURCES INCLUDED INCONSISTENCIES REGARDING WHETHER AARON OR MOSES IS TO BRING ABOUT THE FIRST PLAGUE AND THE NATURE OF THE GESTURE THAT WILL INITIATE IT, WHETHER THE FIRST TWO PLAGUES WILL INVOLVE THE NILE ONLY OR ALL THE WATERS OF EGYPT, AND THE DIFFERENT TERMS USED FOR PHARAOH’S OBSTINACY, “STIFFENING THE HEART.” THE PASSAGES FROM P SEE THE PLAGUES AS DEMONSTRATIONS OF GOD’S POWER; THOSE FROM J AND E CONCEIVE OF THEM AS PUNISHMENT. BY FUSING THE SOURCES, THE REDACTOR ADDS TO THE NARRATIVE A SENSE OF THE MULTI-VALENCE OF EVENTS. IN ADDITION, HE HAS WOVEN THE SOURCES INTO THREE TRIADS, EACH WITH A CONSISTENT PATTERN, FOLLOWED BY A CAPSTONE TENTH PLAGUE. IN INTRODUCING THE FIRST PLAGUE OF EACH TRIAD, GOD TELLS MOSES THE MAIN LESSON THAT THE TRIAD WILL TEACH (7:17, 8:18, 9:14). THE FIRST TWO PLAGUES OF EACH TRIAD ARE PRECEDED BY WARNINGS TO PHARAOH, WHILE THE THIRD IS NOT. BEFORE THE FIRST PLAGUE IN EACH GROUP GOD SENDS MOSES TO PHARAOH IN THE MORNING, SAYING, “STATION YOURSELF BEFORE [PHARAOH],” AND BEFORE THE SECOND [GOD] SAYS “GO TO PHARAOH” WITHOUT SPECIFYING THE TIME OF DAY. ALL THE PLAGUES IN THE FIRST TRIAD ARE BROUGHT ON BY AN ACTION OF AARON; IN THE SECOND TRIAD, THE FIRST TWO ARE BROUGHT ABOUT DIRECTLY BY GOD AND THE THIRD BY MOSES; IN THE THIRD TRIAD, ALL ARE BROUGHT ON BY AN ACTION OF MOSES. THESE NINE PLAGUES RESEMBLE CALAMITIES THAT OCCUR IN NATURE (MANY ARE ATTESTED IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN LITERATURE), BUT THEIR PATTERNS, THEIR TIMING AND RAPID SUCCESSION, AND THEIR ANNOUNCEMENT AND REMOVAL BY MOSES SHOW THAT THEY ARE NOT A RANDOM SUCCESSION OF NATURAL EVENTS BUT THE PURPOSEFUL WORKINGS OF DIVINE POWER. THE TENTH PLAGUE STANDS BY ITSELF: MOSES, STILL IN PHARAOH’S PRESENCE FOLLOWING THE NINTH PLAGUE, RECEIVES WORD FROM GOD AND WARNS PHARAOH IMMEDIATELY OF THE FINAL PLAGUE, ONE THAT WILL BE MANIFESTLY SUPERNATURAL, UNLIKE ANYTHING KNOWN IN HUMAN EXPERIENCE. **ADELE BERLIN, 21ST C. USA**