

Plagues, Passover, and the Exodus from Egypt

1. Ex 3-6 as preface to Passover and Exodus from Exodus

The introduction of main themes of the book of Exodus in Ex 3-6

- God honors covenant with Abraham through salvation of Israelites from oppression and deliverance into the Land promised Abraham (2:23-24: “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out... God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”)
- The exodus marks the expansion of the Abrahamic covenant and the beginning of the fulfillment of the promises, and the people Israel’s are forged into a nation special to God, as a first-born son (4:22; also 6:7: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God; you shall know that I am YHWH your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.”)
- God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob = YHWH, God of Israel = God of the entire world, who can shape the history of other nations (e.g. hardening Pharaoh’s heart) = Creator of the cosmos, who thus can bend the rules of Nature (e.g. miracles, plagues, parting of the Reed Sea)
- Consistent w/Israel’s status as chosen *nation*, God saves Israel through the hand of Moses, who is fated to be its leader and lawgiver. Moses is paradigm of king, whereas his brother Aaron is both paradigm and the literal ancestor of priests.
- The progressive realization/revelation of YHWH’s identity and power by Israelites and by Egyptians. YHWH reveals himself to Moses and via Moses to the Israelites, who are uncertain but are convinced through miracles and acts of power. Likewise, at the beginning of the narrative, Pharaoh does not know who YHWH is, but he learns through His acts—albeit slowly due to God hardening his heart at key points!
- Among Israelites, miracles cause belief, but suffering causes disbelief (first hint: incident with bricks and straw Ex 5). This becomes a repeated theme in the rest of the book of Exodus, esp. during the time in the Wilderness.



Narrative and theological tensions:

- The puzzle of God’s identity: Who is YHWH? Exodus can be read as a progressive explanation, told through the discussions with God and/or reactions to God’s actions by a series of figures who first do not understand and then understand to varying degrees: Moses, Aaron, Israelites, Egyptian magicians, other Egyptians, Pharaoh
- God’s special relationship w/Israel vs. the universality of divine power
- Moses vs. Aaron

3. Plagues upon Egypt –

Literary Structure:

- 10 plagues are organized into 3 sets of 3, with the last as the climax.

Themes:

- Competition between Aaron and Moses vs. Egyptian magicians (= competition between YHWH vs. Egyptian gods), culminating in the belief of the magicians in YHWH's power
- Repeated attempts to convince Pharaoh through signs that YHWH is God; Pharaoh progressively realizes YHWH's power, yet his heart is hardened again and again.
- YHWH predicts Pharaoh's heart being hardened and also causes it!

Plague	Instruction	Agent	Hardening of Pharaoh's heart
Sign: Aaron turns rod into snake (7:1-13)	"Say to Aaron, Take your rod..."	Aaron	Reason = Pharaoh miracle matched by magicians: "Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the YHWH said."
First Series			
1. Water of the Nile turned to blood (7:14-24)	"Go to Pharaoh in the morning..."	Aaron	Reason = Pharaoh miracle matched by magicians: "But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as YHWH had said."
2. Frogs 7:25-8:15	"Go in to Pharaoh"	Aaron	Reason = Pharaoh miracle matched by magicians + divine respite: "But the magicians did the same by their secret arts... Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said, ' <u>Pray to YHWH to take away the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to YHWH.</u> '... And YHWH did as Moses requested... But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as YHWH had said."
3. Gnats (8:16-19)	"Say to Aaron, Stretch your rod"	Aaron	No reason given = Pharaoh is stubborn even despite the inability of magicians to match the miracle – and despite their own belief in YHWH as God: " <u>The magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not... And the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God!'</u> " But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as YHWH had said."
Second Series			
4. Flies (8:20-32)	"Rise up early in the morning and wait for Pharaoh"	God	Reason = Pharaoh seems finally to be convinced and agrees to YHWH's terms, then changes his mind when plague problem is fixed through Moses' prayers: "Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land." But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so; for the sacrifices that we offer to YHWH our God are offensive to the Egyptians... We must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to YHWH our God as he commands us." So Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to sacrifice to YHWH your God in the wilderness, provided you do not go very far away. Pray for me." Then Moses said, "As soon as I leave you, I will pray to YHWH that the swarms of flies may depart"... And YHWH did as Moses asked... But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and would not let the people go."
5. Cattle plague (9:1-7)	"Go in to Pharaoh"	God	No reason given = "But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the people go."
6. Boils (9:8-12)	"Take handfuls of ashes"	Moses	Reason = Divine action: "YHWH hardened the heart of Pharaoh"

Third Series			
7. Hail (9:13-35)	"Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh"	Moses	Reason = Again, Pharaoh seems to be convinced and agrees to YHWH's terms, then changes his mind when plague problem is fixed through Moses' prayers: "Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "This time I have sinned; YHWH is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to YHWH!" ... Moses said to him, "As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to YHWH; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the YHWH's. But as for you and your officials, I know that you do not yet fear YHWH God."... But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials. So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go, just as YHWH had spoken through Moses."
8. Locusts (10:1-20)	"Go in to Pharaoh"	Moses	Reason = Divine action: "YHWH hardened Pharaoh's heart"
9. Darkness (10:21-29)	"Stretch out your hand"	Moses	Reason = Divine action: "YHWH hardened Pharaoh's heart"
Climax			
10. Death of Firstborn (11:1-10)		God	Reason = Divine action: "YHWH hardened Pharaoh's heart"

Some scholars speculate that each plague is meant to show YHWH's power as greater than that of specific Egyptian gods. Whether or not this is true on such a specific level, the plagues serve to elaborate a concept of YHWH as God in a broader sense than the deities of Egypt and other polytheistic neighbors of Israel, deities whose powers were confined to specific realms.

Plague	Egyptian Deities
Nile to blood	Khnum, creator of water and life Hapi, Nile god Osiris, whose bloodstream was the Nile
Frogs	Heket, goddess of childbirth whose symbol was the frog
Gnats	??
Flies	??
Cattle disease	Hathor, mother and sky goddess whose symbol was the cow Apis, bull god
Boils	??
Hail	Seth, god of wind and storm
Locusts	Isis, goddess of life Min, goddess of fertility and vegetation, protector of crops
Darkness	Amon-Re, Atum, Horus, sun deities
Death of firstborn	Osiris, judge of the dead and patron deity of the pharaoh

3. Passover

- Repeated theme of the firstborn
- Exodus as ritual/festival aetiology
- Intertwining of narrative and legal material in Ex 11-13:
 - 11: Narrative foreshadowing of final plague, killing of all firstborn, told in terms of the warning preceding it
 - 12:1-28: Instructions on what to do to avoid one's firstborn being killed, plus instructions how to commemorate this event as a "day of remembrance" and "perpetual ordinance" each year from this point onwards
 - 12:29-42: Narrative descriptive of final plague, plus Israel's flight and plundering of Egypt, told in terms of the event itself.
 - 12:43-16: Instructions about the celebration of Passover and consecration of the firstborn ("when YHWH has brought you into the land of the Canaanites... you shall set apart to YHWH all that first opens the womb.")