

Sunday

BACK TO SCHOOL

Bible-study: 2020/09/06 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – *Exodus 12:1-14*

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

The Lectionary presents us with the preparations that God ordered to protect His people – slaves in Egypt; the descendants of Jacob's twelve sons – from a final divine offensive against that wicked nation, which was oppressing them. This is, undoubtedly, one of the most exciting and well-known moments in the Bible as a whole. As such, it has come under much scrutiny from sceptics, who claim that the notorious plagues are *fully* explicable without the intervention of God.

Thus, Colin Humphreys, for example, 'Director of Research at the University of Cambridge [and] Professor of Experimental Physics at the Royal Institution in London',¹ writes: '[I]t has long been realized that the plagues follow a natural connected sequence.'² It's all really quite straightforward, supposedly; and unremarkable. And goes something like this –

'So if Egypt did suffer ten plagues, what is the first, the blood-red river? Some have suggested an algal bloom, something similar to the Red Tide of algae seen in the Gulf of Mexico [along the coast of Florida – see the photo to the left³].



While the parallels between a harmful algal bloom and a "blood" river are compelling – both of them lower oxygen levels so that fish and plants [would] die – there may be another explanation. Just as the Nile becomes red with silt when the Blue Nile joins the White Nile in the Sudan, so, in the days before any dams were built, an excessive Nile inundation would have seen a blood-red tide sweeping downstream. That the plague of blood lasted only seven

days is suggestive of such a one-off flood. The stench left behind after floods have receded – leaving fish stranded and river mud everywhere [– laced with abundant human excrement – this is long before good sewerage had been

¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colin_Humphreys.

² *The Miracles of Exodus: A Scientist's Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories* (2003), New York, N. Y.: HarperSanFrancisco, 113.

³ See: <https://www.floridadaily.com/southwest-florida-congressmen-want-sba-to-declare-disaster-due-to-toxic-algae-red-tide/>, (accessed September 1, 2020).



invented, mind – the Nile *was* Egypt’s toilet] – also corresponds with the stench reported in the biblical account. ...that the next plague was a plague of frogs confirms th[is] big-flood theory. Frog plagues are, or, were, until the high dam was built at Aswam, fairly common in Egypt. and they occurred at the time of the Nile inundation in the summer. So after the excessive flood came a huge number of frogs [in its wake, looking to exploit an enlarged habitat]... But what about the rest? It took ten plagues of increasing severity to persuade the Pharaoh to let Moses and his people go.

[Well, p]lague three was a plague of lice. Some scientists have rather arrogantly concluded that ancient Egyptians would have been unable to distinguish between lice and invisible biters such as ticks and midges and small mosquitoes. Having spent time with illiterate Bedouin who are well aware of the differences, I think it highly improbable that lice meant anything other than lice. Lice are spread by contact. [And p]erhaps in the confusion engendered by the [first] plagues people neglected normal hygiene and lice prospered.

Plague four... If the fish had rotted and died on the banks of the river a plague of flies may have resulted. Egypt is relatively fly free compared to other parts of Africa, so a plague of flies would have been unusual and vexatious. ...

Plague five was a plague of animal deaths. The account in *Exodus* states that donkeys and camels were killed but not pigs or goats. This curious anomaly has led scientists to conclude that this was a plague of African horse sickness or bluetongue, viral diseases spread by the midges of the fourth plague. these diseases affect the animals mentioned in the Bible but not those omitted, swine and goats. You’d think that pharaoh would have had enough by now, what with his camels and donkeys keeling over. But no – he still refused to let Moses and his people leave. So another plague it was.

Plague six was a plague of boils. This could well have been an outbreak of cutaneous anthrax, typically contracted by handling the corpses of infected carriers. Since anthrax can be passively carried by camels and donkeys, perhaps the surfeit of dead ones lying around caused an outbreak. Cutaneous anthrax, which produces unsightly purple boils, is rarely fatal, though it can lead to blood toxemia and death in certain circumstances.

Plague seven was a plague of hail. In the winter, visitors to Egypt are shocked at how chilly it can get. I’ve been in a hailstorm in the Western Desert – a place where it isn’t even supposed to rain (though it does). It has snowed once in Cairo in the last century and probably hailed a dozen times. So this “plague,” which would accompany a particularly cold winter, though unusual, even somewhat freakish, is perfectly believable, even in the hot climate we expect of Egypt.

Still no joy from Pharaoh. And let’s face it, hail isn’t that scary. So for plague eight God decided to get really mean: plague eight was a plague of locusts. In any country in the Middle East[,] locusts swarming can mean everything is eating and famine is certain. People are genuinely scared by such things. Again, during a residence of seven years in Egypt, I was present during two locust scares – both originating in the upper Nile and heading north. In one, a plague of locusts flew up the Nile munching most of what got in their way, only stopping a few miles from the outskirts of Cairo. ...

A plague of locusts, in an era without pesticides or early-warning systems and aerial observation, is very believable. The Israelites, living in Goshen ...being north of Memphis (present-day Cairo), would have been the last

to be affected by the locusts, which, by then, may have ceased to swarm. Once all the crops of the Egyptians had been eaten they would have been reduced to eating old supplies of grain – which led, many believe, to the tenth and final plague.

But before that was plague nine: a plague of darkness. Despite there being evidence that the Santorini volcanic explosion of 1652 B.C. distributed vast amounts of ash in the Nile and Delta regions it is less easy to connect this with the plague of darkness (and the plague of blood), as some have tried to do. The argument here is that the eruption caused the darkness as the ash obscured the sky, and then it entered the river, making it turn blood red. If we are to allow the sequence any validity, then the plague of darkness would have come first and the plague of blood later. But setting that aside, a far more reasonable explanation of the plague of darkness is something I've experienced myself in Cairo: a *khamsin*, or duststorm. ...can easily block out the sun for several days. The arrival of a sudden and severe *khamsin* after a prediction of darkness would have [had] a huge impact on those who experienced it.

The final plague is the most intriguing in a way, and the hardest to explain. The tenth plague was a death plague on firstborn sons. Very nasty in a patriarchal society where the firstborn son tends to get all the love and attention. But herein lies the clue: the firstborn are the most dominant – ... After the collapse of agriculture following the preceding plagues there would have been acute food shortages. Secret stores of grain would have been worth a fortune – and available only to those who were dominant... But grain stored for too long is subject to mycotoxins, surface growing fungi, a potential cause of rapid death. It has been proposed that a group of the most dominant citizens – largely firstborn sons – helped themselves to a last supply of grain that was infected by mycotoxins. These can kill through mere inhalation. When they all died, the rumour that there was a plague on firstborn sons would have spread rapidly. The Jews themselves were spared: by virtue of their eating the Passover meal'.⁴

This all sounds plausible. And we shouldn't be surprised that *natural* agents caused some of the plagues: 'The LORD is the Creator of all the earth and all creation is in His power.'⁵ He used Amphibians and insects instead of bullets and shells to make His 'war' on Pharaoh.⁶ But we cannot, in fact, push the scientists' explanations too far. There remains too much artificiality about the operation of the plagues. Consider, the timing of the final one – the "Passover" – 'is stated precisely.'⁷ It occurred at midnight: [Ex. 11:4]. This is not how viruses spread. *As we've come to know, right?!* Victims don't die *en masse* as if at the "click" of someone's fingers. The infections; the deaths take place as a series, spread out over a long period of suffering, one followed by the other. There's a "Patient Zero" and the numbers climb from there. Like bringing something (gradually) to a boil.

⁴ Twigger, Robert (2013), *Red Nile: A Biography of the World's Greatest River*, New York, N. Y.: Thomas Dunne Books (St. Martin's Press), 86-89.

⁵ Chester, Tim (2016), *Exodus for You*, Epsom, Surrey (U. K.): The Good Book Company, 78.

⁶ Dozeman, Thomas B. (2009), *Exodus (Eerdmans Critical Commentary)*, Cambridge; Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

And no virus is so selective *and successful* either: ‘Every firstborn in the land of Egypt’ is killed in *one* night: [v.5]. The scenario described above about spoilt little rich-boys hoarding and stuffing themselves with poisonous, half-rotted cereal hasn’t the explanatory power. Something more *fantastical*; that is to say, out-of-this-world, *magical* – for lack of a better word – is recorded in our pages.

“Exhibit A,” perhaps, the Passover excepted, which mentions God Himself – ‘I’ – personally performing the plague *four* times [12:12-13], (and not an airborne microscopic “nasty”) – is the commencement of the third assault – I quote: ‘Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats!’ That is to say – they didn’t emerge slowly from asphyxiated marine-life. No maggots are mentioned; there’s no observable, slimy, protracted “larval stage.” Rather, Aaron performs a miracle akin to the creation of man in *Genesis* [chapter] two: ‘The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.’[v.7]

In other words, as the biblical commentator Thomas Dozeman observes, ‘the [very] language used to describe the [plagues]’ problematizes ‘a naturalistic interpretation’.⁸ The darkness, for example, of the ninth is no ordinary “darkness,” he argues. Not when the original language of *Exodus* is scrutinized: ‘The study of [the] Hebrew [word employed,] *hosek*[,] makes it difficult to imagine just what the...author is describing. The plague of darkness is not the night. ... The image suggests an oil slick or something comparable. ... All light is eliminated. The Egyptians are unable even to make artificial light in their homes through fire. ... The imagery suggests something like a black hole where light is not simply absent but consumed.’⁹

Of course, the *massive* disruption caused by the plagues – taking the text literally, as I think we should – should help us determine when the Exodus transpired; that there would be *evidence*. And Arielle Kozloff, a biographer of (Pharaoh) Amenhotep (the) IIIrd, suggests – *tentatively* – that this may be the case during his reign: ‘Suddenly, in Year 12 [about 1393 B.C.], Amenhotep III’s scribes stopped writing, or so it seems, because after more than a decade of chronicling the opening of quarries, the conquest of Nubia, bull hunts, lion hunts, marriages, in-laws, temple projects, sailboats, and even the construction of a “pleasure lake,” there are no dated records at all for eight years. ...[and] this lull was completely out of character, and it suggests trouble.’¹⁰

She continues: ‘There is no evidence of a major foreign invasion during Amenhotep III’s reign, therefore the culprit was most probably something such as a natural disaster like an earthquake or a major disease outbreak. Earthquakes are fairly common in Egypt because it lies at the junction of the Eurasian, African, and Arabic tectonic plates... A quake centered at Thebes could have caused a great many deaths not only from stone structures

⁸ 245-246.

⁹ 246.

¹⁰ Kozloff, Arielle P. (2012), *Amenhotep III: Egypt's Radiant Pharaoh*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 110. (See also: Norrie, Philip (2016), *A History of Disease in Ancient Times: More Lethal than War*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 20f.)

collapsing on scores of priests and temple staff within them but also by the spread of fires in closely concentrated workshops and [homes]... Modern seismic studies have identified quakes a bit later in date, but not yet within Amenhotep III's years... On the other hand, there are many texts and inscriptions from the 14th century B.C. that imply or actually state the presence of infectious disease, of plagues, during this period. ...

The most concrete testimony to serious disease events are the hundreds of twice-human-size, granodiorite statues of Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of war and pestilence, commissioned by Amenhotep III... He had more statues made for Sekhmet than for himself and all of the other deities combined. Never had a like occurred, truly! Weighing nearly a ton each, ...[m]any of the Sekhmets bear unique mentions of otherwise undocumented towns or villages that seem to have mysteriously vanished from the face of the Earth, like many in Europe during the Black Death. Their names on the goddess's statues are the only records of their existence. [Apart from this, m]ost of the other evidence is very sketchy. ...luxury domestic and ritual goods declined in number. ...[only a] few bronze objects can be dated to [this time, etc.].¹¹ Something devastating occurred. Something embarrassing to the state. Something that deserved to be censored.

Which *could* explain why there are no *actual* references to the events of *Exodus* in the archaeology. No chiselled depictions or laments 'about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children', [Ex. 12:37] abandoning Egypt having 'plundered' the populace [v.35-36], and hiking out into the desert to the east [v.37]. This silence "from the earth" is regarded as a major problem for the reliability of the Scriptures and for the Church that calls them, "the Word of the Lord." We'll need to talk some more about this next week. But for now I do want to point out that, *taking the text literally* – counting backwards 480 years from the fourth of Solomon's reign, remember,¹² puts this morning's episode in the *fifteenth* century (B.C.), when *Thutmose* (the) IIIrd was on the throne and *not* his great-grandson, Amenhotep (the) IIIrd (as Kozloff proposes (above)).

There may be other issues: 'However you count them or whichever ones you include, the first nine plagues, while having a definite pattern and repeated motifs (especially Pharaoh's "hardened heart"), also contain logical inconsistencies and repetitions. If [all] the water was changed to blood by Aaron's rod (*Exodus* 7:20) how could there be water left for the Egyptian magicians to do the same thing (*Exodus* 7:22)? Did the blood or the dead fish (*Exodus* 7:18) poison the water? The cattle that died by pestilence in the fifth plague were resurrected to die of boils in the sixth plague and re-resurrected to die once more by hail in the seventh plague. Are the biting mosquitoes (or gnats or lice) in the third plague the same as the flies or gadflies in the fourth plague?'¹³ This quotation is from a book, *The Parting of the Sea*, by Barbara

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111-113.

¹² See: Randall, Benjamin T. (23rd of August, 2020), "Back-to-Sunday-School" Bible-study: 2020/08/23 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – *Exodus* 1:8-2:10', available at http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Bible-Study-20200823-St.-Matthews-Episcopal-Church-McMinnville-Exodus-1v8-2v10_BTR.pdf, (accessed September 2, 2020).

¹³ Siversten, Barbara (2009), *The Parting of the Sea: How Volcanoes, Earthquakes, and Plagues Shaped the Story of Exodus*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 36.

Sivertsen, published by Princeton.

Now, some of what she says is groundless. That is, *some* of her “logical inconsistencies” are no such thing when the text is read *carefully*. In the N.R.S.V., what we’re actually told is that ‘all the water *in the river* was turned into blood’. [...A]nd there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt.’ It was, then, everywhere *to be seen*; the author does *not* say that there was nothing *but* blood. In fact, there will have been water sitting in receptacles that had already been drawn from the Nile (on earlier occasions). On shelves; in homes. In jugs, buckets and animal-skins. Indeed, the author – Moses – explicitly indicates that there was unpolluted water to be found in the kingdom: he remembers that ‘the Egyptians’ found some by ‘dig[ing]’ for it: [v.24]. He offers this detail so that his audience might marvel with him at how *extensive* God’s action had been. Hear me: “Extensive,” not *comprehensive*. Siversten created, in other words, a problem that exists only in her mind because was careless with the text.

What about the “reincarnating” cows? Here also an obvious counter-argument occurs: there will have been an ongoing cattle trade between Egypt and her neighbors. Of livestock being sold and imported; brought to market from parts, regions and nations unaffected beyond Pharaoh’s domain. Siversten’s accusation of “inconsistency” – behind which lurks, I would guess, a more sweeping denunciation of *Exodus* as, “fake!” *Fiction* – holds true only if we imagine, as perhaps she unwittingly does – that the events of today’s reading take place on a stage (as in a theatre), where all the “players” are visible all the time before us. That the “scene” is static. Not dynamic and fluctuating as in the real world, with immigrants, pilgrims, mercenaries, ambassadors, camel-spice-caravans *and cows* likely crossing in and out of Egypt more-or-less constantly – as is the case in modern America. And is it not just merely possible *but probable* that, driven by a consumer demand for beef, herds were replenished *between* the Heaven sent disasters? I think, “yes!” The Egyptians weren’t suddenly transformed into vegetarians: ‘Tomb and temple art throughout the dynastic period, 3200-341 B.C., provides abundant pictorial evidence of bovine slaughter and butchering...in thousands of carvings and paintings’.¹⁴

¹⁴ Grivetti, Louis E. (2000), ‘Food Prejudices and Taboos’, in Kiple, Kenneth F. & Ornelas, Kriemhild Coneè (Eds.), *The Cambridge World History of Food: Volume 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1495-1512, 1497.