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Exodus (3rd lecture): Plagues

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PLAGUES

... We'll talk about the Passover and by Wednesday we should be dealing with the law, and your reading accordingly and adjust your critical summaries, too, as much as possible.

Now, there are two or three things that I would like for our discussion of the plagues section to do for you--or for you to do with it. And first, the manner in which we make this analysis of this section should remind you and say something further to you about what we said earlier in the semester about the literary aspects of the Bible, the Bible as literature. The human contribution or the contribution on the part of the human authors many times is seen in the literary construct, in the literary qualities, in the arrangement, and I think that in this presentation of the plagues story we have an emphasis, part of which can be credited to the human recorder and part of it certainly to God's work in this, of the fact that the manner of presentation even says something about the veracity, the credulity, the credibility, I should say. You are encouraged to take it seriously and to believe and to get an impact from it, to get a message from it by the very manner in which this is presented, which you often don't see as you just read verse by verse until you try to put this together. Secondly, I think this kind of an analysis which shows us the arrangement does again say something specific about how God deals with people, and I think you can see here something of the strategy, the statesmanship (if I may use these terms in relation to God) the strategy and the statesmanship and the logical appeal that God uses in His relations with people. Now, what are these plagues, anyway? In toto they are a part of the way God deals with the human race. If you ask--and you ought to ask this as you think about it--why did God do this? Why didn't He just use

the techniques of Genesis Chapter 1, and as we read there, "God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." Why didn't God--if He is God according to the concept that we have of Him--why didn't He simply say, "Let my people be in Cannon", instead of in Egypt? And they were. I mean, it wouldn't have been any more difficult, you see, for God to perform that kind of miracle than to perform this series of miracles. Of course, some don't believe that they were miracles, and you may explain them however you like, but I've told you before what is our philosophy of miracles if natural law as distinguished from statute law or legislative law is simply a description of observed uniformities in the operation of a natural universe that God made, and that He governs, and then for Him to suspend that operation for a moment in order to achieve a higher purpose, this is all that a miracle is, and in that sense it isn't a miracle, in that sense it is only our insight into God's suspension for a moment of the mechanics of His universe for the sake of doing it a different way for the sake of a higher purpose. Now, in that sense, then, we have to find another reason for God's doing this in this manner. Why should God have belabored himself, Moses, the Israelites and the Egyptians with this series of the ten plagues? There is an explanation, and in the Book of Exodus we find three statements--I'm sorry, I don't have the references right now--but there are three statements that are directed, one to the people of Israel themselves and the other to the Egyptians and another to the whole world. And those statements go this way, and they are statements of purpose relative to why God did things the way He did. In the first place He said, "That ye may know that I am God." And He is speaking here through Moses to the Israelites. So first God said, "I am working this way for the purpose of letting you see and hear and feel and know that I am God." Secondly He said, "that the Egyptians may know that I am God." So, in addition to doing it this way so His people would have evidence on the basis of which to become convinced and to be reassured, He was also doing it this way so that there would be

a visual and auditory and tactual manner of conveying to His enemies, or to the enemies of God's people, what He was having to say; or, in other words, "that you, my people, may know that I am God," and secondly, "that the Egyptians, my enemies and yours, may know that I am God;" and then later on He says, "that all the earth may know that I am God." So He unfolds His purpose here and indicates why, now that He is dealing with people instead of just dealing with the physical aspects of the universe, why He is not now simply exercising His will and saying, "Let it be so," and it was. Because He's now dealing with people, and He has to communicate with people, so He's doing this to communicate reassurance first to his own people, communicate truth and warning to the enemies of God's people, and then He says (and this is why we use the story today), He says ultimately, "that all the earth may know that I am God." ~~Now, what were~~

Now, what were these plagues? Actually, these plagues were largely natural, seasonal phenomena miraculously intensified by divine power. This is my own wording, this is the expression of my own belief. I do not say that they constitute a series of great miracles. They are related to the natural, seasonal things that the people knew about. But I do believe that what they are is a series of natural, seasonal phenomena miraculously intensified by God's power for the purposes already suggested. Now, more important than the specific meaning of any one plague is the order, the internal order among them, the relationships that exist among them, and the total impact made by the whole series. So I'm not inclined to sit down and argue a reason for a long time with anybody about the possible specific meanings of any one, or of any individual plagues. I am more concerned--and that's the genius, if there is a genius, to this particular kind of analysis and study--I am concerned about the internal order of and among the plagues, the relationships among the parts of this order, and the total impact of the whole series. This is what I think God was doing when He did it this way and when He talked to these

people. Now, I do have here the references which I said I didn't have. The one is 7:5, that's the Egyptians one; the one to His own people is 10:2; and the one about all the earth is 9:16. So, in a very short space of the record itself, God does indicate this order in His purposes. Now, one other thing that we should remember by way of introduction to an understanding of these plagues is that Egyptian worship, the religion of the Egyptians was all tied up with nature anyway. They worshiped the Nile River and they worshiped the sun and they worshiped the fog; and so, while this could not be presented as a one-to-one correlation between some point in their worship and each specific plague, it is still true that there was a basis for looking beyond the natural, even on the part of the Egyptians, even in their obstinacy--because most of the obstinacy, by the way, was not on the part of the Egyptian people as such, but on the part of the Pharaoh himself, and we'll show this. But they immediately associated this kind of thing with something or someone supernatural, because their own worship, their own religion immediately ^{directed them} to supernatural power when they dealt with a number of these natural phenomena. Now, let's take a quick look at these plagues. Just to illustrate what we're talking about here; you see, they worshiped the Nile; probably the top priority in their worship was the Nile. Well, immediately in plague 1, the Nile was turned to blood. Well, you see, in God's very first stroke He was telling them or was showing them--or at least this was the impression ~~that~~ they could get from it--that what they had at the top of their list in terms of worship, this other God whom they were fighting now, or who was speaking to them, struck at the very top item on their list and showed His superiority over it. Now you could go right on down the line. The frog comes next in the second plague, and the frog was an object of their worship, and so this immediately upset the natural order of things for them, because now, in this second plague, the frog, under the power of some

other god, the God that Moses talked about, the frog was made to turn and represent something entirely different, something bad, whereas they had been worshiping the frog and thinking of the frog as something good. Well, we could go on down the list, but you can read what these plagues are--the flies, and the moraine(?) on the cattle, and the boils, the darkness and the locusts, and so forth. Now, till we come to the tenth one which is the death of the first-born. But what I want to do is give you a framework in which to examine the internal order, the intra-relationships among these plagues and the total impact. So, what we find here now is, as we look at this, is that we actually have groups or trios made up of 1, 2, 3, this one made up of 4, 5 and 6, this one made up of 7, 8 and 9, and then, of course, the fourth group has just the tenth one in it. It stands out by itself. Let's look at these now, and group 1 includes the bloody water, the frogs and the lice. Group 2, including 4, 5 and 6 of the plagues, is made up of the flies, the moraine or the disease, the cattle disease, and the boils. Group 3, made up of 7, 8 and 9, includes the hail, the locusts and the darkness. Then, of course, as I said, the fourth one is the tenth plague.

Now, let's look at these. You could call these whatever you want. Let's look now for a name or a title for each group. The first group seems to be a group of plagues of repulsiveness, things to which we are not naturally attracted--the bloody water, the dirty water of the Nile then made bloody, you know; you can get your own impression of that; frogs and lice--plagues of repulsiveness. Let's call the second group plagues of pain. And then let's call the third group plagues of destruction. Let's think of the ninth one here in the third group. The reason I say destruction, you can readily see how the hail and the locusts would be destructive, but what about darkness. Well, actually, you see, what was happening here in this darkness--it was not just the absence of light, not that kind of darkness, but this, as it's explained, is a kind of darkness that had something to do with the supernatural in that in this darkness the result of this darkness was that in its context they began to destroy each other and themselves, so this was

a kind of darkness that wasn't just the absence of light, but which was destructive in the sense that because of this darkness and because of the depth and the thickness and the quality of it, it resulted in their self and other destructiveness, and that's why I list it this way. And so I think these titles become these groups rather naturally--repulsiveness, pain and destruction or destructiveness. You see, there's a great deal more to this than what we often think of when we just think of the ten plagues as a series of things that God made happen. It isn't just God saying, "Look, you better do what I tell you or I'll whip you into line." There's much more to it than that. Let's look at it now. Now, take this down carefully--and I know I'm speaking rapidly this morning, but take this down carefully, because I want these to be your tools for your own examination of the total impact of the plagues. Notice these observations: No. 1, in 1, 4 and 7; you see, the first of each of these triads, in plagues 1, 4 and 7 each one introduces the group by presenting Pharaoh with a warning. If you read these carefully now, as Moses carried out God's orders and went to the Pharaoh, in each case of 1, 4 and 7, Moses presented a verbal warning to Pharaoh, and notice, even this is significant, in each of these cases, the 1st, 4th and 7th, Moses goes to Pharaoh with a warning, and the record is careful to indicate that in each case it was "in the morning". Not at night, not at noonday, but in the morning when he should have been at his best physically and mentally, when he could think clearly. God sent Moses to Pharaoh in each of these three cases, the 1st, 4th and 7th, the introduction of a triad in each case, sent him to him with a warning in the morning when he should have been able to think it through, to arrive at his own best judgment. God gave him every advantage. Remember now, we're talking about the Pharaoh about whom in the record other times we read: "God hardened his heart" and "God said, 'I will harden his heart'" or "I have hardened his heart". But remember what I said the other day about that hardening of heart. And here we see the other side

of it. God gave this Pharaoh every advantage possible. In these three cases **he** sent Moses to him in the morning with a clear warning--gave him every advantage to be at his best and to exercise his freedom at his best possible level. I think that's very significant. Notice this now, in the case of the concluding number in each triad, or each group, 3, 6 and 9, these three came without any warning whatsoever; they simply struck like that. God nor Moses gave any warning at all in the 3rd and the 6th and the 9th, the concluding ones in each of these triads. God was reasoning with Pharaoh, so remember how this relates now to this whole question of the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, or the idea of God's arbitrary hardening of Pharaoh's heart. God was reasoning with Pharaoh. Numbers 1, 4 and 7 presented to him with a verbal warning expressed by Moses in the morning when he was clear in his thought and should have been able to be rational, but then by the time that he got down to the ninth plague, he should have been able to put 3, 6 and 9 together in the framework of the group presentation, and he should have been impressed by the fact that--well, you see, a warning here--something a little different here--no warning here whatsoever; a warning here--a little different here--no warning whatsoever; and so on. God was reasoning with Pharaoh. God could have said about Pharaoh what ~~he says~~ Isaiah says to us about God when he says, "Come and let us reason together." That's exactly what God was doing with Pharaoh here-- with all of the audio-visual aids that you could imagine. So the truth really should have been seen by Pharaoh here. He had every opportunity and the plagues were presented in these groups, and this all happened in every case before the plague came. I mean, whenever there were warnings, they were given to Pharaoh before the plague came. There were no warnings with 3, 6 and 9. God was even dealing with Pharaoh in an order and in a pattern of things, the very pattern of which, the very organization of which should have spoken loudly to Pharaoh. Now, in addition to this order within the groups, there is

a significant order among the groups. Let me point that out to you now. Notice, this is observation No. 3, the first group closes with the defeat of the Egyptian magicians. If you will read it carefully, you will notice that when the first plague came Pharaoh said, "Oh, my men can do that." So they, too, turned the water into blood. When the second plague came he said, "Well, they can do that, too." So the Egyptian magicians of Pharaoh's court also duplicated the second plague. But in the end, or at the close of the first group, the Egyptian magicians were defeated. They couldn't reproduce, they couldn't duplicate, so they were defeated at the end of the first group. Even though they had duplicated the first two plagues, they could not duplicate the third one. Now, observation No. 4. With the opening of the second triad now at No. 4 over here, which is the flies, there was a racial or a group distinction made, a distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians. If you will read carefully Exodus 8:22 and 23 you will discover ~~that~~ that now God began to make a distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians. So think of what Pharaoh could have concluded from this if he had taken it seriously and if he had thought about it. Notice a fifth observation. With the opening of the third triad now, No. 7, the hail, there was a further distinction made. I call it a moral spiritual distinction here. Not just a physical one, but there was a distinction made in the opening of the third triad with the hail, a distinction between--notice now, in the second group the distinction was just categorically between the Egyptians and the Israelites, but now in the third triad, the 7th plague, there was a further distinction made, this one between--notice now--between those Egyptians who believed and those who did not, so that in the beginning of the third triad of the plagues now, God even delivered those Egyptians who believed, because those who believed ran their cattle inside. So He even gave them a chance--the people now--and by the way, all the way through this

process, the Egyptian people, the populus, they were being convinced, they were being converted to the true and the living God. It was their king, it was their Pharaoh who refused. So they saw now that a distinction was being made between even ^{within} their own group. If they responded to Moses' message, they were delivered, and if they didn't, they were not delivered. You see this one as recorded in the ninth chapter, verses 20 and 21, was an outdoor plague, and those that believed God's word took their cattle indoors and were spared. So it was not really the Egyptian people so much that were rebelling against God, it was the Pharaoh, and more and more in this process he was being deserted by his people. Now notice this, observation No. 6, at the point of the eighth plague in the middle of the third triad, Pharaoh's cabinet officials capitulated. And if you'll read Chapter 10, verse 7 and following, you will discover that they were ready to give in, they were convinced, and they were advising him to be reasonable. So notice now, as we review, or as I recap for you this sixth observation, look at the movement throughout this group: (A.) You see this development within the groups from warning to no warning within the triads. (B) Within the groups, or, I'm sorry, among the groups you see these distinctions, these divisions that are being made, racially, geographically, and finally, morally and spiritually, even within the Egyptian group itself. And the third subdivision of this observation, (C), notice what happened so far as the king and his subjects are concerned. At the end of the first triad, his magicians are defeated. At the end of the third triad, his own advisers capitulate and are advising him to do the same, and they are urging him to let the Israelites go. And then, if you go to the eleventh chapter and the third verse, you will see that the whole populus, the people of Egypt--and then you can check this by going into the Passover chapter, the twelfth chapter, verses 30 to 33--the people want their king to let the Israelites go. Now, take a back view on this Pharaoh whose heart God hardened and see whether you

wouldn't have done the same, or see what the meaning of this is when God says, "I hardened his heart." God could just as well have said it the other way around: "I gave this man every opportunity, and his own magicians and his own advisors, his own cabinet and his own people finally all urged him to capitulate or to resign himself to me, but he wouldn't do it. He was that kind of a guy." The record might just as well be: "I gave Pharaoh every opportunity to respond to me, but he hardened his heart." Now I could go into the New Testament and show you that in exactly the same way the Pharisees, the rulers of the synagogue, they hardened their own hearts; or the hardening of heart that God does to somebody is only a going-along with what the guy has first done with his own volition. It all comes to this: Pharaoh stands alone; all the people, the magicians and the cabinet members stand against him saying, "Let the people go." So finally he simply consents to public opinion, and he does let the people go, but later on you will see that he didn't change his own mind and heart. How do we know? Because as soon as they were gone, he got his army together and said, "Go out and get them back for me." So all he did here in the letting them go was really to yield temporarily to the pressure of public opinion. This is the kind of a man about whom we have this hardening of heart problem.

Now, I know I've rushed through this too much, but I hope you will see the order within the groups; I hope you will see the significant relationships among the groups; and then remember that I said that the total impact of this message is what's important. You may come up with five or six other significant observations about this as you study it further

Student: "You gave a group of three. In the second point where among the groups you said there were three points: racial, _____."

Well, first, what I was doing here was reviewing the movement of the whole thing. I said first that I would remind you of the fact that within each group there was warning to no warning . And then secondly I mentioned the fact that among the groups there were these distinctions made: racially, geographically and then morally and spiritually. And that was the second point there. And then the third point had to do with the relationships between Pharaoh and his various publics, like his magicians, his cabinet members and then the whole populus.

All right, I'm going to leave it with that and say that we will open our next period with an opportunity for any questions or further observations you might want to make. Now, I think it would be wasting our time to argue about whether or not the plagues were miracles or to try to find out exactly the detailed meaning of every one, but I do think that in this bird's-eye view of the whole you have something that has a tremendous impact in the whole message of truth, and I hope that's what you will get from it.