

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 268

Exodus 7:14-25

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Episode Summary

Exodus 7:14-25 is the entry point for the series of ten plagues God sent upon the land of Egypt and its people for pharaoh's defiance of his command to free his people, Israel. This episode includes an introduction to how scholars talk about the plagues and how that discussion translates to the first plague, turning the Nile to blood.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 268: Exodus 7:14-25. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Alright, Mike. He is risen!

MH: He is risen indeed. It's Easter.

TS: It is.

MH: Really, I mean, that pretty much summarizes it, which is why it's so ancient: "He is risen; he is risen indeed." Everywhere you go, even across traditions, that is translatable pretty directly. Everybody knows what you're talking about, at least within the Christian tradition. So did you do anything special for Easter? Anything at home, or anything like that?

TS: No, not really, other than going to the church service this weekend. But nothing... We're not very traditional, so I don't know if we even hide eggs. We just don't take anything serious, as far as commercial things like that. It's not that I'm against it, it's just... What about y'all?

MH: Yeah. The whole commercialization and somewhat paganization of it, yeah. I know what you mean...

TS: I mean, people get up in arms about that. They really get upset about it if you do the whole egg thing.

MH: Yeah, that's the fertility symbols and all that. But yeah, that kind of thing would have been theologically meaningful a long, long, long time ago. And it's all been lost, at least today. My kids, of course, are older, so we don't even have that on the radar. But we just usually get together for dinner. We do the Good Friday service, and of course Easter Sunday. And it's a time for everybody to get together, which is nice. Other than Molly in North Carolina, everybody's here. So it was nice.

TS: I hear you, Mike. Well, did you see the news about Notre Dame? The fire this week?

MH: Yeah. It's hard not to see that as emblematic of the whole... Not just the situation in France. I mean, France has a serious problem with militant secularism. They have an Islamization problem, but... Even the Muslims to a lesser extent are in the crosshairs of these militant secularists. They use French history to sort of justify that, because Notre Dame was secularized back in the days of the French Revolution and then re-consecrated later. But man, I guess at some point I'll end up going to Paris for some reason, but it's not on my list of places to go. [laughs] It feels like one of Dante's outer rings of hell. [TS laughs] It really does!

TS: It's one of the rings! Wow, okay.

MH: Yeah, I'd put it there. I mean, when I think of France, I just think of... That's a tough place to be a believer. I just admire people who... Historically, it's the seedbed of a lot of European occultism—the whole Jesus' bloodline mythology flakery. And then you've got the militant secularism. You've got Europe (not just France) destroying itself through open door immigration—not vetting anybody. It just... Boy, I can think of lots of places I'd rather visit. [laughs] And then to see this burn, it's like... It's just hard to not see it as some sort of metaphor. But the believers over there are to be admired. They're sticking with it. I know some. Pray for the church in France. It's just a dark place. It really is.

TS: Oui.

MH: [laughs] "Oui." [laughs] You can throw that in. Oui.

TS: Speaking of destroying themselves, we've got plagues coming up, Mike. We have...

MH: That's a nice segue there, Trey. [laughs]

TS: You liked that? Is there any significance to the number of plagues? There are ten of them. I'm just curious whether there's any significance to that.

5:00

MH: I've not specifically run across anything that assigns any meaning to the number. But who knows? I may at some point, but to date I haven't come across anything. In case anybody is wondering, our episode today is going to be... We're going to hit the first plague, because that's in the rest of Exodus 7. But what I wanted to do today was provide an introduction to the plagues (how do scholars think about these things?) and then take some of that in terms of the approaches, and then talk about the first plague.

TS: Well, I'm hoping that you're going to give us a clue as to what the blood type was that God turned the water to. [MH laughs] I'm curious if it's O negative, because we've covered O negative.

MH: I was going to say, "You want me to say it's O negative with Rh factor." [laughs]

TS: Yes, in some ancient document somewhere they knew about blood types, it's O negative.

MH: Yeah, for those of you who aren't privy to the joke, go over to Peeranormal.com and look for the episode on Rh negative blood. Then you'll get it. You'll get the funny. You may even chuckle at that point. [laughs]

TS: There you go.

MH: [laughs] Boy, you're in rare form today, Trey.

TS: Yes, well... yeah.

MH: Alright, well, like I said, we are going to have an introduction to the plagues here, and that's how I'll start. Then we'll get into the first plague, how... some of the perspectives on the plagues, how that helps us think about the first one that's in Exodus 7. We'll do the same thing as we go through the rest of the plagues, too. But since we're at Exodus 7:14-25, let me just read that, and then we'll jump in to how scholars approach the whole subject of the plagues. So beginning in verse 14:

¹⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. ¹⁵ Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. ¹⁶ And you shall say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, "Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness." But so far, you have not obeyed. ¹⁷ Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. ¹⁸ The fish

in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.”” 19 And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.””

20 Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. 21 And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. 22 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 the LORD had said. 23 Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. 24 And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.

25 Seven full days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile.

So the chapter ends with the plague on the Nile, and then we have a seven-day interval until we get to the next plague (and we'll hit that next time). But this is one of the plagues. The majority are focused specifically on the Egyptians and not on the Hebrews. You'll notice as we read that there's no reference that the Hebrews had this problem as well. That's not going to be true with every plague, but for the majority, it is.

But rather than focus on the minutia (we'll come back to some of the details of the first plague), I want to start here by talking about how scholars approach the whole topic. I'm going to be referencing, for the most part, John Currid's book. I alluded to this in our very first episode, and I think a couple of times in other episodes. But he has written a book called *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*. It's Baker Books. It's not an expensive book. Currid is trained in Egyptology and in Old Testament, so this is a good source for thinking about things in Exodus and also about Egyptian material that occurs in other books. So Currid has a whole section on approaches to the plagues. It's over 15 pages long, so he devotes a good bit of attention to it. And he says... The way he breaks things down... We'll just go with it, because he's talking about who thinks about the plagues, in what way, the most. He breaks the four views down into two and two. So there are four basic approaches to how we might understand the plagues.

10:00 And the two most held (what Currid would call the major positions) are what we'll start with.

The first position is that the plagues are natural disasters. This is probably among scholars in general (whether they're Evangelical or not) the majority view. So Currid writes in regard to this:

In general, this interpretation [MH: that the plagues are natural disasters] attempts to explain the plagues of Egypt as typical natural phenomena of antiquity. Various scholars have tried to prove through textual evidence that similar plagues occurred frequently in the ancient Near East. [MH: Currid has a footnote there that I'm going to get to in a moment.] That such events occur even today in Egypt has been used to argue for the historicity of the plagues. In addition, this position holds that the order of the plagues was naturally progressive, that is, each plague was a cause or catalyst of the subsequent plague. They built one upon the other.

In a footnote, if you're interested in other material as far as the plagues being natural phenomena, he provides a couple of sources. I'll just give them to you here. Steiglitz' article (this is an older article, but it's kind of a standard reference point) in *Biblical Archeology Review*, volume 13, 1987... He wrote an article called "Ancient Records and the Exodus Plagues." For a good summary of this view, you could consult Hoffmeier's article in *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*—his entry on "Plagues in Egypt." I will be referencing that a bit in this episode. Nahum Sarna, in his book *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, has good summaries of this. And David Livingstone: *The Plagues and the Exodus*. That's in a journal that's fairly obscure to find: *Archeology and Biblical Research*, Volume 4, 1991. Now you can find that one online if you just google that. So google "Livingstone" and then "plagues in Exodus" and you will find a link to that particular article, which is good, because I don't think that journal is published anymore. Again, there you have a good summary.

This view, not surprisingly, has a long history. It goes well back into the 19th century. It gained traction due to the influence of Flinders Petrie, who was a very famous Syro-Palestinian archeologist and also a very famous Egyptologist. Currid has a nice summary of Petrie's influence here, and I'll read that:

Flinders Petrie popularized the position, and with the publication of his *Egypt and Israel* [MH: a book] it became the dominant understanding of the plagues. Petrie took the issue a step further by claiming that the plagues were not only a natural sequence, but also the consequences of seasonal changes. In particular, they followed the cycle of the inundation of the Nile River.

At some point, Currid is going to quote from Petrie]:

The river turned to blood, with the fish dying, was the unwholesome stagnant Nile just at the lowest before the inundation, when it is red and swarming with organisms. The Egyptians have to resort to wells and cisterns at this time in the early part of June.

Let me just stop there. This is Petrie writing. You'll notice at the end of Exodus 7, there was a reference that the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink. You'd think, "Wouldn't that be blood, too? Because it was blood even in the jugs and the jars." The Exodus narrative actually doesn't say whether their digging for water along the Nile was successful or not. But it's interesting that Petrie picks up on this, and he observed the same thing happening in Egypt while he was there on one of his many campaigns during the low point of the Nile, when it turns red because of the soil and you can't drink it.

15:00

The frogs abound after the inundation has come in July. The plagues of insects, murrain, and boils, belong to the hot summer and damp unwholesome autumn. The hail and rain came in January. This is closely fixed by the effect on the crops. The barley must have been up early for the wheat to be yet "hidden" or hardly sprouting. This would show it was planted early in November, in ear by the middle of January, and ripe early in March. The flax has like seasons, and the wheat is a month later. The locusts come in the spring, over the green crops about February. The sand storms bring a thick darkness that may be felt, in March, at the break of the hot winds. And the last plague, the death of the first-born, was at the Exodus in April. The intervals are about a month apart; from the middle of January to mid April the time agrees to the months.

Now that's from Flinders' *Egypt and Israel*, which was published in 1911. You notice how he didn't really explain the last plague, and that's going to become an issue. But Currid adds, at the end of that quotation:

According to Petrie's calculations, then, the plagues upon Egypt were natural events occurring in less than a twelve-month period.

So that view (published in 1911) sort of became the dominant view in scholarship. And you can see where it appears to have some coherence to it—some alignment, at least. It has weaknesses, but that quotation from Petrie doesn't really betray them. We'll get to that in a moment. But you could see how this would sound sort of reasonable.

Now the most recent scholarly defense of this view, though, is that of Greta Hort. And this comes from an article that she published in 1957 called "The Plagues of Egypt." It's in the journal abbreviated ZAW, the *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*. Just put "ZAW" in and you'll probably find it. I don't know if this is going to be available online. It probably isn't. But a summary

of her work you would actually find in Hoffmeier's *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* essay. So that's a tool (a resource) that any reasonable library—any good reference library that includes religion—is going to have. So you can read it there, too—at least a summary of it. Now Currid summarizes Greta Hort's work as well. Let me read you his couple of paragraphs there. He writes:

According to her study, the first six plagues clearly reflected the ecosystem of ancient Egypt.

Let me just stop there. She's already sounding like Petrie. But notice that she groups things (in the first six plagues)... Her comments here are on the first six. Hold that thought.

The first plague was the result of a high inundation that made the river red with sediment (causing it to look like blood). Concurrent excessive precipitation brought flagellates and their bacteria from mountain lakes and streams, resulting in animal death in the river. The death of the fish polluted the water habitat, a disaster which forced the frogs from the river onto dry land. The frogs died, and soon thereafter mosquitoes (or lice) and flies multiplied off the dead amphibians. The insects in turn carried disease (probably anthrax) to the land animals and eventually to humans.

Plagues seven through nine were not related sequentially, but they had in common their origination in the atmosphere [MH: whatever that means; this is Currid's wording]. Hort emphasized the naturalistic character of these plagues, detailing frequent similar occurrences in Egypt. The final plague may have been merely a reflection of the high infant-mortality rate of ancient Egypt.

That's the end of Currid's summary of Hort's view. You can see she's right in the tradition of Petrie, maybe a bit more nuanced in the discussion. Again, this is the dominant view in general scholarship. And not surprisingly, this view is mostly held by those who would deny any supernatural causation to the plagues (though that isn't a truism). You will find Evangelicals who find coherence in this to some extent, but they won't go the full nine yards and just rule out the supernatural for a couple of them. Or they'll weave the supernatural somewhere into the narrative and then use the natural phenomenon that has been witnessed in Egypt as an explanation. So they'll get God in there somewhere, but they don't view the plagues as having a direct divine causation (maybe death of the firstborn or something like that). There'll be some allowance somewhere. Now Currid notes about this whole "Who's in what camp?" thing... He writes this:

Those scholars who hold that the plagues were natural disasters are generally of two camps. Some believe that the fact that the plagues can be explained as natural phenomena actually serves as confirmation of the supernatural. In other

words, if the biblical material detailing the natural phenomena is true, then it follows that the entire narrative, including the supernatural elements, is accurate.

20:00

So Currid is saying that some would say, “Look, if the writer got this right (observing natural phenomena), then we have to take him at his word, as well, when it comes to the supernatural causation.” So some are going to try to put God in there that way.

Most interpreters, however, argue that the commonplace occurrence of phenomena akin to the plagues of Egypt actually explains away the miraculous. The divine or theological elements in the text are merely the author’s attempt to dress up a simple naturalistic account. Present-day scholars overwhelmingly adhere to the latter position [MH: which I just had noted].

On the surface you can look at this, and what Petrie says and what Hort says kind of works, at least for the first six. It kind of works reasonably well. But the need for a sequential break for plagues seven through nine is, in my view, kind of telling. That exposes a real weakness here. And the death of the firstborn hardly seems explainable by natural disaster or just the general infant mortality rate. The language is just far more specific than that. And to Currid’s credit, he’s less generous than the way I just summarized that. Just so you can get a feel for how Currid thinks about this, he writes:

The interpretation of the plagues as natural disasters has obvious weaknesses and breaks down under careful scrutiny. First of all, nowhere in the six chapters detailing the plagues is there any hint of one plague’s having been the source of another plague [MH: that’s important]. Only by mere speculation can one argue from the text that the frogs were infected with anthrax [MH: that’s a little shot at Hort], and that the disease was passed on to land animals by lice [MH: the text doesn’t say that]. Second, the ecological sequence crumbles after the sixth plague because the hailstones of the seventh plague had no relation to the anthrax of plague six. In addition, plagues seven through nine had no chronological connection with one another even though there was a conceptual relationship. And the tenth plague had absolutely no link with the previous plagues. Finally, the argument that plagues one and ten were simply natural phenomena is difficult to defend. The theory that the first plague was symbolic—the water did not turn into blood but merely looked like it—cannot be supported by the text. In no way does the Book of Exodus present that plague as having been metaphorical in nature; rather, it relates the disaster as direct historical narrative.

So that’s a summary, and I would agree with Currid’s criticisms there. The natural disaster view (which is the dominant view) has the veneer of coherence. It has the veneer of reasonableness—that it covers the necessary ground. But it actually doesn’t when you probe it a little bit.

Now the second major view (or major approach to the plagues) is what Currid and others would call the “literary creations” view. Just to summarize it, this is, in terms of its history, a little more recent than the natural phenomena view. You could trace this to the early 20th century. Currid does note that this one seems to be getting more and more support as time goes on. The basic idea is that behind each plague is a kernel of history that was dressed up in the telling of the story. In other words, we have mythic history here, but mythic history not being real history. If you’re confused by that terminology, you need to go back to the very first episode that we did introducing the book of Exodus, where I talked about mythic history. I think mythic history *is* history. There are a number of reasons why I think it’s methodologically flawed to impose our modern sense of history and what we think history requires on ancient texts, and then we hit the end of that road and say that the ancient stuff isn’t really history. Well, we can’t apply the tools of modern historical validation *to our own lives*. I couldn’t write my own biography and meet the criteria of modern history. And just a simple observation like that tells me that maybe we’re just not approaching this the right way. [laughs] Because I *do* know my story. I was there! I’m an eyewitness. But nevertheless, I can’t meet the criteria, and neither can any of you in telling your own story. So I think we need to rethink what we’re asking for there.

25:00

But anyway, back to the literary creations view. Basically this view is saying, “There’s something that happened here, and then the writer of Exodus is putting a theological spin on it.” Scholars who hold this view are on a spectrum here. They’re going to believe something is historical in there. They’re going to believe something is ahistorical or fabricated in there. It’s going to be a mixed bag. So they’re going to deny the historicity in some respects and they’re going to try to affirm it in others. Their approach is a literary approach. They’re looking at what the author is doing with boots-on-the-ground events and then trying to judge the result of that literary production as, “Well, there’s something that went on here, but it’s theological spin, and chances are good that some of it is basically on target (that it hasn’t been spun up too much), but then there are going to be other things that, ‘Yeah, he just went off the deep end in his description of this or that.’” So it’s going to be a mixed bag here.

Now there are two other views. I’ll telegraph where I’m at. I like both of these views. I think they work well in tandem together. We’ll take them one at a time. The third view is the polemic view. This is the idea that the ten plagues were directed against specific Egyptian deities. If you want a little bit more source material here, you could get Charles (Chuck) Aling’s book, *Egypt and Bible History*. It’s 1981. It’s an older book. But Chuck has a lot of Egyptological training, so it’s worthwhile. J. J. Davis’ *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* is also old (1986), but it’s still worthwhile. And G. A. F. Knight’s *Theology as Narration*. I’m not familiar with that book. I’m familiar with the other two. That’s an Eerdmans title. It’s even older (1976). So those would be three starting points if you’re interested in pursuing this perspective. Currid comments on this (polemic) view. He writes this:

There should be no question that the biblical authors understood the plagues in that manner [MH: in other words, as a polemic]. The Book of Numbers, for example, reports: “The Egyptians were burying all their first-born whom the Lord had struck down among them. The Lord had also executed judgments on their gods” (Numbers 33:4). In fact, the plague account itself contains similar wording: “For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord” (Exod. 12:12). The idea that the disasters that Egypt experienced were a mockery of that land and its customs is unmistakable. The Scriptures even use the term *mockery* (*‘ālal*) for God’s judgment upon Egypt (Exod. 10:2).

So that’s in the narrative portion about the plagues. So the polemic view is that plagues are what they are specifically because they have something to do with judging the gods of Egypt. Now I’m not going to go into the details at this point. When I’m done summarizing the approaches to the plagues... We’re going to hit the first plague, and then I’ll apply some of this. And I’ll telegraph where I’m headed here. There are polemic elements in the first plague, and I’ll talk about those in a moment. But there are also elements... Or at least the fourth approach helps us to get a good flavor for what’s going on in Exodus as well.

The fourth view is that the plagues are examples of de-creation. Now this is also a literary argument. And this one might be unfamiliar to a lot of you in the audience. But I’ll use Currid’s explanation for this. He has a nice summary of it. He writes:

Many scholars have pointed out that Exodus 1–15 owes much of its structure, language, and theology to the Genesis creation account. As Warren Gage states, “the exodus-eisodus history of the hexateuch [MH: that’s the Pentateuch five books plus the book following] is so structured as to be a redemptive reenactment of creation.”

30:00

So this view is saying that if you look at Exodus 1-15 carefully, there are going to be parts of that chunk of Exodus that directly hook back into the creation account in Genesis. And the plagues are a part of this. But of course, the plagues would not be about creation, they would be about the reversal of creation. Hence, it’s called de-creation.

In other words, the account of the deliverance of Israel out of the oppression of Egypt through the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea reflects the narrative of the original creation. Although the creation theme is reflected in many passages of Exodus, we will take time to consider only three of them.

And then he goes into his book and he talks about how this works in three places. So I would say, go back to the original episode that began our series on Exodus, where we talk about the relationship of Exodus to Genesis. That will give you a little bit of flavor for what we're talking about here. But specifically, we'll focus in on the plagues. There are things about the plagues (the way they're described and even the order and the structure) that sort of mimes creation material in Genesis. So scholars have observed this and thought, "Hmm. Why would the author be writing it that way?" And so this idea that the plagues are an intentional de-telling (instead of re-telling) of creation, there must be something to that. It must be done for some theological messaging. I think that's a good trajectory. Currid adds a little bit more information by way of examples here. We'll just pick a couple. He writes:

The first five verses [Exodus 1:1-5.], for instance, show awareness of the Genesis tradition of the seventy persons descended from the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 46:26–27). Most importantly, the biblical writer describes the *Sitz im Leben* [MH: That's the life setting.] of Israel in terms of the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28: "But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them" (Exod. 1:7).

And the point is, the language there sounds a lot like Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." So scholars look at that and say, "The writer obviously knows the wording of Genesis, and he's using the wording here to describe something else, so he must be trying to strike a connection. Second example from Currid:

Second, the water ordeal Moses underwent is reminiscent of the redemption of Noah in Genesis 6–8. After the birth of Moses, his mother Jochebed could not hide him for more than three months, so she placed him in a *gōme 'tēbāh* ("wicker basket"; Exod. 2:3). The first term, *gōme* ' is an Egyptian word that means "papyrus." *Tēbāh*, an Egyptian word which means "chest, coffin," is also used in reference to Noah's ark [MH: back in the flood account]. One should observe as well that in Exodus 2:3 Jochebed covers the wicker basket with "tar and pitch" as Noah did the ark (Gen. 6:14). The deliverance of Noah can be viewed as a re-creation because God directs the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 to Noah and his offspring: "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'" (Gen. 9:1). That command is the same decree that the Hebrews were fulfilling in Exodus 1 as they multiplied and increased in Egypt. So the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt is being cast by the biblical writer as a re-creation.

When it comes to the plagues, scholars are going to argue that since that takes the land apart, or reverses order—that's like a de-creation. We'll get to the point

of how that might work theologically when we hit the first plague here in a moment. Currid continues:

35:00

Finally, that the exodus is a second act of creation is evident in Exodus 13–15; the Genesis creation account served as the paradigm for Israel’s deliverance at the sea. That is to say, “the redemptive creation of Israel at the sea is cast in the same narrative style of original creation as the pillar of divine presence brings light into darkness (Exod. 13:21, cf. the first creative day), the waters are divided (Exod. 14:21, cf. the second creative day), and the dry land emerges (Exod. 14:29, cf. the third creative day).” In Deuteronomy 32:11 God’s tender care of Israel after she had passed through the sea is likened to an eagle’s hovering over and protecting its newborn. The Hebrew term *rāḥap* (“hovers”) used here also occurs in Genesis 1:2, where the Spirit of God “hovered”... Those are the only two occurrences of *rāḥap* in the Pentateuch. That the biblical author is drawing a parallel between the original creation account and the Exodus narrative is further confirmed by his use of the Hebrew term *tōhû* [MH: Remember in Genesis 1:2, “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was *tōhû vabōhû* (formless and empty).” That term was used in Deuteronomy 32:10 to describe the wilderness that they’re wandering through in the Exodus narrative.] to describe the wilderness (Deut. 32:10). He also used this word to characterize the conditions at the original creation (Gen. 1:2). As with *rāḥap*, *tōhû* also appears nowhere else in the Pentateuch.

That’s the end of Currid’s treatment there. Now if you want to get a fuller glimpse of these correspondences, I’m going to send Trey a chart in a pdf file that is drawn from Currid’s book. He puts a lot of this stuff in chart form and we can see the parallels. And they’re actually pretty interesting. So you can take a look at that. So this view (the de-creation view) has God, in effect, demolishing creation order in the same manner that he erected creation order back in Genesis. Why would God do this? Well, to the Hebrew reader (the Israelite reading his or her Bible), the point would be telegraphed that, “I guess we know now who has sovereign control of the order of creation. It’s the God of Israel.” They would be able to see the correspondences in their texts. So there’s a theological point being made.

This is also a big deal with Egypt because of the Egyptian concept of *ma’at*. I’ve mentioned this before, but the Egyptian *ma’at* is the way things are supposed to be, because this is the way that the gods created them to be or intended all things to be. It’s a cosmic and an earthly and a social order. It’s the order of everything. Everything is the way the gods intend. And it was Pharaoh’s job (as the incarnation of Horus) to maintain that order. That was his specific task in Egyptian religion. So Pharaoh is supposed to maintain *ma’at* as it was bestowed on earth by Re and of course, the whole pantheon and all this kind of stuff. So Currid describes *ma’at* this way. I’ll just read his little summary:

Ma'at was a result of the first creation [MH: this is Egyptian theology] and part of the inherent structure of creation. *ma'at* held order together. *ma'at*, therefore, was the antithesis of chaos. It was a dynamic force not limited to the initial structure of creation, but always necessary because “the voracity of the forces of chaos continued to menace the very existence of the created world.”

Consequently, the Egyptians strove to maintain *ma'at* in their earthly existence. *ma'at* was not merely an ideal concept removed from daily living, but the model for human behavior. Humans had to struggle to preserve *ma'at* and to keep cosmic balance upon the earth...

In ancient Egypt, the king had the duty to maintain *ma'at*; he was considered the personification of universal order. Thus, in the “Instruction for King Meri-ka-Re,” [MH: an Egyptian text] the Pharaoh is advised by his father to “do *ma'at* whilst thou endurest upon earth.”

Every Pharaoh had the obligation to reestablish and reaffirm *ma'at* upon accession to the throne. The forces of chaos could upset *ma'at*, so at the advent of a new king, order had to be restored.

40:00 Now Hoffmeier in his *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* article notes that this was the point of the plagues, generally. So this will telegraph where Hoffmeier is at. I've already told you that I like both the third and fourth view (the polemic view and the de-creation view) because the de-creation view is a direct attack on *ma'at*—the whole Egyptian concept of *ma'at*. And it shows that Re and any other Egyptian deity and Pharaoh are not in charge of the order of earth. They're not in charge of the order of the cosmos. They're not in charge of anything. The one who maintains this order is going to demonstrate that he is the one who maintains this order by destroying it, but undermining it, by reversing it. To demonstrate that he alone (the God of Israel—namely, Yahweh, the one of whom Pharaoh said, “Who's this guy?”) is the one deity who is in control and who is master of all these things. So that de-creation emphasis—that attack on *ma'at* just generally (and we're going to see it work out in the first plague and other plagues)—is de-creation and it's also a pretty effective polemic against the gods of Egypt. Hoffmeier summarizes this in his view—that this is basically the general point. I want to read you what he says in his *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* essay. He writes:

The cumulative effect of the plagues on the Egyptian view of cosmic order and the king's role in maintaining it is a major issue in the plagues. From Dynasty 4 onward [MH: the Old Kingdom era, the pyramid age], the pharaoh bore the title “Son of Re.” As such, he was the god of the Egyptian state and was responsible to maintain the cosmic order (*ma'at*) on earth that had been established by Re at

creation (Frankfort 1978: 51–56). Because of the bond that existed between the created order and the king as the incarnate “Son of Re,” [MH: of course he’s also the incarnate Horus] he was responsible for the fertility of the land as well as for the proper function of the Nile, and because of the strong bond between the sun god, Re, and the king, he was the one who illuminated the two lands, i.e., Egypt [MH: Upper and Lower Egypt] (Frankfort 1978: 56–59). The vitality of the land was ensured by a number of annual festivals and related rituals over which the king presided.

The nine plagues certainly showed that a cosmic struggle was in progress, and they challenged the king’s ability to maintain that cosmic order. If the king failed to execute his duties properly, the land would suffer, i.e., it would be in a state of chaos (*isft*), which is how Egyptian literature describes the 1st and 2nd Intermediate periods. When a strong king appeared and regained control of the land, *ma’at* was reestablished.

Hoffmeier is going to go on, and he quotes from the prophecy of Neferti to illustrate Egyptian theology on this point. So I want to read you that excerpt. He’s quoting from *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, which is an anthology of Egyptian texts. And this portion of the prophecy of Neferti reads as follows:

Dry is the river of Egypt, one crosses the water on foot; one seeks water for ships to sail on, its course having turned into shoreland ...

The land is bowed down in distress, owing to those feeders, Asiatics who roam the land. Foes have risen in the East, Asiatics have come down to Egypt ...

Re will withdraw from mankind: Though he will rise at his hour, one will not know when noon has come; No one will discern his shadow, no face will be dazzled by seeing him.

Then a king will come from the South, Ameny the justified his name ... Then Order (*ma’at*) will return to its seat, while Chaos (*isft*) is driven away.

That’s *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Volume 1. And Volume 1 of that series, by the way, is Old Kingdom. So right away, you’re going to read that: *Asiatics*. “Well, didn’t Mike say that was the Egyptian term for Semitic people?” Yeah, it was. So we have a reference to the sun darkening. We have a reference to the Nile drying up. We have the land in general distress. Those are two elements that sound like the plagues. But this takes us back to... a little bit. This is Old Kingdom stuff, so it’s pretty old, in Volume 1. It takes us back to that chronological disconnect. There are things in Egyptian literature that sound like the Exodus plagues. But if you want to know why there’s a chronological

disconnect, I'm not going to go back into that quagmire. You can listen to the earlier episodes on Exodus as we were just starting the series to know what the issues there are. Hoffmeier concludes his selection after quoting the prophecy of Neferti with this. He says:

45:00

The plagues of Exodus 7–10 would have been understood by pharaoh and the Egyptians as a direct assault on the king, who was responsible for the proper function of the Nile, the crops, and the sun. This could be why the unnamed pharaoh of the exodus is so angered by the “signs and wonders.” They were beyond the limits of his control. Perhaps his continued obstinacy was due to his hoping he could somehow reestablish himself as the Lord of Ma’at.

Obviously, that ain't going to happen. So the de-creation view, I think, has real value. I think it serves as a polemic, just generally, but we still have... I still like the third view (the polemic) as well, because there are some clear shots indirectly at specific Egyptian deities. So we're going to transition now into the first plague. I like both views (three and four). To me, they work nicely together. So let's make a few observations about the first plague in Exodus 7:14-25. That's the Nile turning to blood. So let me just read five of those verses, verses 20 through 25 again.

²⁰ Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. ²¹ And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. ²² 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 the LORD had said. ²³ Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. ²⁴ And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.

²⁵ Seven full days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile.

Now the setting of this confrontation is pretty ironic. It's ironic that Moses meets Pharaoh along the bank of the Nile. It harkens back to Pharaoh's decree after the midwives episode that “every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile.” That was Exodus 2:22. The Nile was, of course, the place where Moses had been placed in the basket as a baby (Exodus 2:3). So just by virtue of the setting, things have come full circle. There's a lot of irony here. We could also note how the Egyptian magicians... Yeah, they do the same thing. They turn the water to blood. But you realize that in light of what we talked about (especially

the de-creation view), they show by doing this that they don't have the power to restore ma'at either. Pharaoh is the one who's expected to be able to do this, certainly not his magicians—his handymen, his priestly henchmen. So they make the problem worse. They actually undermine, in a peripheral way, Pharaoh's own status. He's the one who's supposed to be able to reverse this. "Oh, we'll help you out here. We'll make it worse." [laughs] He can't do anything. So there's a lot of irony in that as well. There's a lot of theological polemic there, too.

So let's talk about the de-creation assault on ma'at thing in the polemic with the first plague, more specifically. Now the Nile's annual flooding is referred to as "the inundation" in academic literature. That was actually deified. The inundation itself was like a deity concept or a deity figure. Currid notes:

[The Nile's] inundation was deified and personified as the Egyptian god Hapi. In fact, as early as the Pyramid Texts the Egyptians called the Nile River by the divine name Hapi (*h'pi*). They often portrayed the god as a bearded man with female breasts and a hanging stomach [MH: probably to show pregnancy], all of which reflect the concept of fertility. And, indeed, Egyptian writings spoke of Hapi as the one who kept Egypt alive. The "Hymn to the Nile," for example, taught that life in Egypt came from the Nile: "O all men who uphold the Ennead [MH: that's a group of deities., fear ye the majesty which his son, the All-Lord, has made, (by) making verdant the two banks. So it is 'Verdant art thou!' So it is 'Verdant art thou!' So it is 'O Nile, verdant art thou, who makest man and cattle to live!'

50:00

Verdant is another term for *life-giving*. So this is a hymn to the Nile. In Egyptian theology, all life comes from the Nile. So it's bad news if the Nile is polluted. And Hapi, the personified deity figure—the deification of the inundation of the Nile... And when the Nile floods, you realize what happens. The Nile overflows its banks, and that deposits rich soil on either side of the Nile. That's why things can grow. And this isn't just a few yards. This is miles of soil. This is how Egyptian people eat. They can't grow their crops in sand and in the desert. They depend on the regular annual inundation of the Nile to survive. They refer to the inundation as the deity Hapi. Well, Hapi is either not doing the job or Hapi is weak. He or she (it's a hybrid figure) is weak compared to the God of Israel. The God of Israel has mastered Hapi. It's the God of the Hebrews that Pharaoh will not recognize who actually controls the Nile. It's a theological lesson, and a pretty frightening one, and one that would make the Egyptians angry—especially Pharaoh. It would probably frighten most of the populace, but Pharaoh knows what everyone else in the room is thinking—what everyone else in the *country* is thinking. "You're the son of Re. You are the maintainer of ma'at. Do something about it." And he can't. He just can't. It's a public humiliation. It's a public display, not only of Pharaoh (perceived as a deity incarnate), not only of Pharaoh's fecklessness, but also Hapi's.

And this is how the plagues are going to work. You're going to have de-creation elements that are going to serve as a general attack on ma'at, which is by

definition an attack on Pharaoh and his status and power—his divinity. But you're also going to have individual plagues belittle (make small and show to be weak) specific Egyptian deities. So I think both of these things are in play.

To end our episode here, Currid summarizes it this way:

This disaster [MH: starting with the first plague] was a demonstration that true sustenance came only from the hand of Yahweh and not from a false pagan deity of the Egyptians.

It's a threat to Egyptian religion generally, because if this condition persists (and the other plagues are going to back up the same point), might the Egyptians be thinking, "Well, maybe we should worship Yahweh, because he's the one that keeps us alive anyway?" This is what's at stake. So you have all this going on in the backdrop of the Egyptian mind. And the Hebrews are well aware of this stuff. They've been in Egypt a long time. They know the drill. I'm not going to say they're experts in Egyptian theology, but they kind of know the drill. They know what Egyptians think and how they think about Pharaoh.

So what we'll do next time is we'll process the rest of the plagues in the same manner, as polemic and as this anti-ma'at, de-creation idea. Exodus 10 has the rest of the plagues. I don't know if we can hit them all in one episode or not. Probably a couple of episodes. Who knows? But this is how we're going to do it. We're going to go through each of the plagues and talk about how they re-enforce both of these approaches to what's going on.

TS: Alright, Mike. We appreciate it. I want to remind everybody, *please*, if you haven't done so, go rate or leave us a review on iTunes. We appreciate everybody that has so far. Alright, Mike, we look forward to the rest of the plagues as the Egyptians did, [MH laughs] and I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.