

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 269

Exodus 8-10

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Episode Summary

The previous episode discussed the four scholarly approaches to understanding the plagues upon Egypt in the exodus story. Two of those approaches (polemic, de-creation) were deemed more fruitful than the others, for they cast the plagues in terms of Yahweh's mastery over creation order (the Egyptian concept of Maat) that in turn serves as a polemic against the theology of the ancient Egyptians. In this episode we go through the plagues of Exodus 8-10 (plague numbers 2 through 9) with an eye toward thinking about each plague as de-creation and polemic.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 269: Exodus 8-10. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Well, Mike, I hear there's some changes in the wind for you.

MH: [laughs] Yeah, that's true. That is true. I'm betting some people in our audience have heard whisperings (or really not whisperings, but something a little bit more plain than that) on the internet (social media and whatnot). But yeah, I'm going to be leaving my present employer, FaithLife (Logos Bible Software). My last day will be at the end of May. And I've loved it. I love the company. And we will still be doing some (hopefully) fruitful and useful things in conjunction with the company. But I am moving on to the next phase of life and ministry. And I don't want to get too deep in the weeds here. I plan to either blog about it or make a video about it toward the time when I'm actually transitioning. But I guess I can say this. I'm going to be the... I'll try to keep this short. This will be shorthand information. I'm going to be the Executive Director of the School of Ministry at Celebration Church in Jacksonville, FL. It's really an interesting situation. It happened just like my Logos job happened—a whole set of really overt and a little bit... I don't want to use the word “strange” (that makes it sound spooky), but just an unusual set of Providential circumstances that made me pay attention to some things down there and some people down there, and that evolved into this. The nutshell description is that you're going to be witnessing (because it's already in transition) what happens to a megachurch (and a megachurch pastor) when they repent from being a megachurch. In other words,

when they repent from the culture. I've had long discussions with Stovall Weems, whom I will be working for (and with) in the School of Ministry, and he wants to change the culture. But that's not really the ministry goal. That's a peripheral thing.

The nutshell version is that I'm the Executive Director of the school, and I essentially get to create my own ministry school—my own school of content. They have a long history of doing practical training through internships with the university there in town. But in Stovall's words, "We don't teach our people anything, and that *must* change." So his idea of change is Mike's content.

We have been discussing this off and on for a year, and it has culminated in this decision to go down there and partner with him. That's the simplest way I can put it. Mike is going to have his own school, and the focus of that school—the content portion—will be what we do here on the podcast. It'll be studying Scripture in its own original context. There will be a focus on the content of *Supernatural* and *Unseen Realm*—biblical theology, biblical worldview in its ancient original context. This is what happens when a megachurch decides, "We are going to start doing what we're supposed to be doing," i.e., the Great Commission, and doing biblical theology. So this is a work in progress. There have been meaningful changes in the culture there over the course of a year that I have watched, and in some ways been a part of.

So this is new—new for me, new for everybody else. But it's going to really, I think, have a wonderful impact on the next generation (and this generation) to accelerate the proliferation of the kind of stuff we do here on the podcast. I will be continuing with the podcast. It actually unleashes me to write more, once the school is up and running. They plan to start it in February of 2020. I'm excited about it, even though I have a real affection for FaithLife (Logos) and what I've been doing. It's been great. But it's been a Providential stepping stone to this next thing.

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So if you've heard about that, yep, it's true. And it may sound a little odd, because "megachurch" and "Mike" are words you do not put in the same sentence. [laughs] I'm sort of the antidote to that kind of thing. I'll be saying more about it. I'll make a video or blog or something like that toward the end of May. So be looking for that, and you'll get more information and I'll be able to unpack the whole story for you in the future.

TS: Alright, we get the scoop. You heard it here first.

MH: [laughs] For a lot of our listeners, this will be the first.

TS: Absolutely. And we'll have more things to announce, hopefully at the conference, that goes hand in hand—that we've been working at for over a year.

Ideas. So like you said, this is going to free you up to do some things that we've talked about. So there's going to be lots of good things coming.

MH: Yep. There's a lot of symbiotic relationship things going on here. This will have a ripple effect through a number of things (like Trey says) that we have been talking about and hoping for and planning. And I just never expected it to happen this way, but God has a sense of humor. So... [laughs] here we are. Mike is... It's a new neighborhood in Middle Earth. You know? It straddles the mainstream and Middle Earth. But it's a good spot and there's lots of intentional movement toward proliferating the content that you're used to here. So this will be a big step.

TS: Alright, that sounds exciting. I bet your family is excited to be moving down to Florida. Get your tan? And next time we see you...

MH: I must admit that the thing I'm looking forward to most (and I'm serious about this) is a 3000-mile road trip with the pugs [laughter].

TS: You're going to need to take video and document that.

MH: [laughs] It's going to be good quiet time because we're going to have to take a couple of vehicles. But I just picture myself listening to audio books, and there the pugs are, right there. So a little goofy, but I'm actually looking forward to it. But we'll be driving and, of course, stopping at places and doing touristy things. I think it'll be fun.

TS: That's awesome. Well, Mike, getting into this week's episode, you said you were a plague guy. You really are a plague guy, because you're going to attack all of the plagues, just about, except for one, in this episode.

MH: Yeah, let's plague the audience with the plagues. [laughter]

TS: Is this your favorite episode to date?

MH: I don't know, I'm not through it yet! [laughter] No idea. I'll tell you when we're at the end. I thought it would just be more convenient. We're going to cover Exodus 8-10, because those are the plagues up until the death of the firstborn and the Passover. I wanted to keep those together because there are a number of things to unpack there. But what I want to do in this episode... In the last episode, we sort of introduced the plagues and we talked about the different views of how scholars look at the plagues. And there were four approaches that we talked about. There was the approach that says the plagues were natural disasters. Then there was the approach that said they're just literary creations. And for most people who camp out there, that means they're pseudohistory. Not everybody, but most. And then the third view was that the plagues are really polemics against specific Egyptian deities—against Egyptian religion. And then

the fourth was that the plagues should be understood as de-creation, which is also a literary argument. And specifically, how the plagues hook back into God's own creative activity and the plagues de-create—they disorder—what God has ordered. They take apart what God has brought together. They take a habitable world and make it uninhabitable. It's this idea of how the plagues hearken back to Genesis' creation themes, but in a negative (reversal) way.

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We said at the end of the last episode that I prefer both view three and view four (the polemic view and the de-creation view) because I view de-creation in the context of an attack theologically on the Egyptian religious concept of Maat (the way things ought to be—the way that the gods have arranged things to be, the whole concept of order, of cosmic and earthly) and how that gets funneled through the pharaoh and is represented in a range of specific Egyptian deities. If we look at the plagues as describing de-creation, and specifically targeting the concept of Maat, that really is a polemic against Egyptian religion and the pharaoh. It just gets everything in one fell swoop. And at the end of the last episode, we looked at how the first plague accomplishes this.

So what we're going to do in this episode is I'm going to go through plagues #2-9... We'll stop when we hit the death of the firstborn. But how do these concepts of de-creation and religious polemic—theological polemic... How are they reflected in these other plagues (#2-9). So that's how we're going to approach this episode, which... To do that and not break it up, we had to go through chapters 8 through 10. Now I'm not going to read every word of chapters 8 through 10. But what I'll do is go plague by plague, tell you where textually it breaks down, and then I'll read an excerpt from that section and just get into some commentary.

So the second plague, after the Nile is turned to blood (which is plague #1), is the plague of frogs. Now this is Exodus 8:1-15. Let me just read the first four verses here:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. ² But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your country with frogs. ³ The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. ⁴ The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants."

Of course, a little later on, the magicians, the *hartumim*, (we'll come back to that term a little bit later) are able to duplicate this again. In other words, they don't show mastery over Maat to *restore* Maat—to restore order—they just make it worse. So that is self-defeating, because Pharaoh is the one charged in Egyptian

theology with maintaining Maat. So here are his special priests (his magician priests). “Magicians” is the word the ESV uses. And they’re supposed to be his assistants in maintaining Maat, and they just screw it up even more. If we look at the plagues this way (that it’s an assault on Maat and on Egyptian religion generally, specific deities, and then pharaoh gets looped into that), the plagues make sense.

In regard to this second one... I’ve referenced Currid’s book before (*Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*). I highly recommend that. It’s a very useful book for lots of different topics. It’s broader than the Exodus story. But since we’re here, it’s especially useful. So Currid has a comment here on the second plague. He says:

The second plague (Exod. 8:1–6) also appears to be a contest between deities. The Egyptians regarded the frog as a symbol of divine power and a representation of fertility. One of the main goddesses of Egypt was Hekhet, who was depicted as a human female with a frog’s head. She was the spouse [MH: and this is important] of the creator-god Khnum. He fashioned human bodies on his potter’s wheel, and then Hekhet blew the breath of life into them and assisted as midwife at their births.

Now let me stop there. We’ve brought up Khnum before, when we talked about the Egyptian midwives with the birth stool (that expression), and how it was really drawing on Khnum theology about the potter’s wheel and the creation of human life. And of course, in Exodus 2 when you have the midwives scene, they’re preserving human life from Pharaoh’s destruction and throwing the kids into the Nile and all that stuff. So we’ve brought up Khnum before. And here he plays a role—specifically his wife, who is depicted as a human female with a frog’s head. So the plague of frogs, very naturally, is going to hearken back to that imagery. She is the one who breathes the breath of life into the new humans that Khnum creates on his potter’s wheel. So Currid adds here:

Hekhet also had the responsibility to control the multiplication of frogs in ancient Egypt by protecting the frog-eating crocodiles. But Yahweh...

Very obviously, Hekhet is not in control here. It’s Yahweh who is multiplying the frogs. So it’s a pretty direct attack on Hekhet, and against Maat generally.

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But Yahweh overwhelmed Hekhet and caused her to be impotent in her task. She could not repel or resist Yahweh’s overpowering regeneration of frogs. It was the Hebrew God who really bestowed fertility; he rapidly produced frogs so that they would be a curse upon Egypt. The theme is the sovereignty of God over fertility, over Egypt, over her deities, and over all things.

So if you're an Egyptian and you see this happen, you're going to be thinking theological thoughts, and they're not going to be comforting. Hekhet is essentially getting taken out to the woodshed. She is not in control. Yahweh is overtly cast as superior, because he's dominating her in her realm. This is how a lot of these plagues are going to work. If we move to plagues three and four, these are flying insects, gnats and flies. This is the rest of Exodus 8. We'll cover both of these. So Exodus 8:16-32. Let's just go to verse 16. We'll read not quite to the end, about to verse 24. So after the frogs, we get this:

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.'" ¹⁷ And they did so. Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. ¹⁸ The magicians [MH: there they are again—the *hartumim*] tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not [MH: so their ability ends here] So there were gnats on man and beast. ¹⁹ Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" [*elohim*]. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

²⁰ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself to Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water, and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Let my people go, that they may serve me." ²¹ Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand. ²² But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth. ²³ Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen.'"" ²⁴ And the LORD did so. There came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants' houses. Throughout all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by the swarms of flies.

This kind of language and this distinguishing between the Egyptians and the people of Goshen (the Hebrews), as we've said in the previous episode, is one of the major reasons why the naturalistic explanations just don't work (even though on the surface they're kind of coherent) in this idea of a chain reaction between the blood and the frogs and the flies—all this stuff. How one led to the other. And we pointed out that the text never says that they were actually connected in a cause-and-effect relationship. You have to assume that. And then when you get

to a situation like this, there's no natural explanation for this kind of distinguishing in the text. So you might like the naturalistic explanation for some of the plagues, but you're not getting that from the details of the text. In fact, you have to ignore or subvert certain details of the text to make that work. Now Currid writes here:

The third and fourth plagues (Exod. 8:16–24) both involved flying insects as divine judgments against Egypt. The third plague was *kinnim*, a Hebrew term that is not clear in meaning although it likely refers to gnats. Other suggestions are that the *kinnim* were vermin, lice, or maggots. The fourth plague came in the form of *ārōb*, which is commonly understood to be a stinging fly, possibly even a mosquito. These plagues may have been directed against the Egyptian self-generated god of resurrection, Khepre, who was symbolized by the flying beetle.

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That's a speculation. If you've ever seen the beetle image in Egypt, it's also the dung beetle. But you also see the beetle with wings, and that's what Currid is alluding to here. And since these are both flying insects, some scholars have speculated that what we have here is an unleashing of those kinds of critters in a demonstration of who's in control of them.

Now there's another way to look at this as well. There are other indirect references to these plagues in other sources that I think make a better connection to Egyptian religion. And one example is Herodotus in Book II, Section 37, when Herodotus is commenting on Egypt's priests (not specifically on the plagues, but Herodotus is going to get into that). He makes an observation about the priests that takes us into this territory of the third and fourth plagues. He writes:

[Egypt's] priests shave the whole body every other day, that no lice or aught else that is foul may infest them in their service of their gods.

Now the point here that Herodotus is alluding to is that these priests would shave their bodies to avoid their bodies being home to lice or gnats or anything else that would render them unclean and disqualify them from temple service of their gods. Now obviously, that is impossible during these two plagues. The plagues robbed... If you're a priest, and your home is infested with gnats and flies or whatever these flying insects were, you're not going to be able to be completely rid of them, which means you are ceremonially (ritually) unclean, which means you cannot serve your god. You cannot bring offerings. You cannot perform certain rituals on sacred space in Egyptian religion. And that means that the gods are neglected. And they're not going to be able to do... Either because they don't want to be neglected or they're rebellious or there's this certain sense where the priesthood (all this ritualistic mishmash) is an essential part of working with the gods to maintain Maat. You're not going to be able to do that. That is not going to be in operation because your priests would defile the sacred space. So the flies and the gnats are another assault (peripherally, but certainly effectively) on

Egyptian religion. It's just impossible to be rid of these things, so there's no... It's going to disrupt the offerings and other ritual acts with Egypt's gods. Now the word for priest in the biblical accounts, as I've mentioned already, is *hartumim*. It's translated "magicians," which is a bit unfortunate, because that makes it sound like they're doing card tricks or pulling rabbits out of something. It's kind of misleading to the modern ear. But it's not actually that bad. The reason is that Sarna, for instance, notes that:

...*hartumim* derives from an Egyptian title meaning "chief lector priest."

You say, "What's a lector priest?" Well, Redford, in the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, writes this about lector priests. Redford is an Egyptologist, and this is a major reference work for ancient Egyptian life and culture and religion and history. He writes:

The priest who actually recited the spells and rites, both in temple ceremonies and funerals, was a 'lector priest'... Egyptian literature often portrays lector priests as wise men and sages who can foresee coming events. In *The Tale of Khufu and the Magicians*, for example, lector priests perform miraculous feats, and are privy to secret knowledge, unknown even to the king... They also took part in funerals, reading the necessary spells and assisting in the Opening of the Mouth ceremony.

Now the lector priest is the *hartumim* of this Old Testament account in Exodus. I gave you Sarna's assessment. His sources (you might be interested in some of these, if you can obtain them)... His sources for that are Lambdin's article "Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament." It's from the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* in 1953. Lambdin was proficient in Middle Egyptian and Hebrew. And J. Quaegebur (this name's a struggle), in his essay, "On the Egyptian Equivalent of Biblical Hartumim," and that's in the book *Pharaonic Egypt: The Bible and Christianity*, edited by Groll, 1985. That is a very hard book to find. But anyway, those are the sources. So the connection here is certain. It's sure. It's based on good textual evidence.

So if you have gnats and flies infesting the land, they are preventing the priests from being ritually able to perform the service of their gods. Now I alluded to the fact earlier that the *hartumim* were able to mimic what's going on in the earlier plagues. They make things worse. They contribute to Pharaoh's inability to maintain Maat. And as we read through this passage, you would have noticed that in this case, they can't do it. And that's important here, because... Let me go back to the Redford quote. When Redford alludes to *The Tale of Khufu and the Magicians*, he says that these particular priests perform miraculous feats, are privy to secret knowledge, unknown even to the king. So the Pharaoh is looking to these guys for a special ability to help. (And earlier, they make it worse.) And here, they can't do anything. They actually say to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of

God.” So it’s worse than just being rendered ritually impure so that you can’t maintain the Egyptian cult, the worship of the gods, and all the stuff the Egyptians thought they had to do to maintain Maat on earth and keep the gods happy and all that stuff. It’s not just that bad. It’s that they are supposed to have power to perform miracles, granted to them by the gods, of course. And in this demonstration, they fail. They are beat. They can’t do it. So Yahweh is just demonstrated—point blank—as being superior. So the God of the Hebrews is defeating Pharaoh. He is de-creating and reversing Maat. He’s showing who is really in control of order on earth, and really in heaven as well, because that’s the realm of the gods. And these priests... at every point, and specific Egyptian deities too... The plagues are an assault on the whole Egyptian theology, their religious worldview, and their religious system.

Let’s move on to #5. We’ve got the pestilence on the cattle. This is Exodus 9:1-7. I’ll read that whole section.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me.”² For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them,³ behold, the hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.⁴ But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.”’”⁵ And the Lord set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.”⁶ And the next day the Lord did this thing. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died.⁷ And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

This is another indication... If Moses is predicting the time, this is not a naturalistic sort of thing. I understand if people like that idea. It has a surface coherence to it, but it doesn’t derive from the details of the text. So here we have another case with a distinction being made that just doesn’t work naturalistically. We’ve got the cattle under assault now—the flocks and the herds. Currid notes:

Plague five was the pestilence on the domesticated animals [MH: just generally, and he’s going to loop in something really important here] of Egypt (Exod. 9:1–7). Bull cults, of course, are known to have flourished throughout the land [MH: of Egypt] in antiquity. Ancient Egyptians viewed the bull as a fertility figure, the great inseminator imbued with the potency and vitality of life. Apis was the most important of the Egyptian sacred bulls. Other bull cults included Buchis (sacred

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bull of Hermonthis) and Mneuis (Heliopolis). In addition, bulls were understood as embodiments of the great Egyptian gods Ptah and Re. Numerous important female deities were pictured as livestock animals: Isis, queen of the gods, bore cow's horns on her head; Hathor was given a bovine head for her task of protecting the king. The livestock animals provided necessities to the people—in the form of food, milk, clothing, transportation—and they were destroyed in the fifth plague. The biblical author is again demonstrating that Yahweh was sovereign over and in control of all things. The Egyptian gods were imposters.

If you've done any reading in Egyptian religion, the Apis bull is the one that stands out here. That was a major Egyptian cult aspect of their theology and their worship because of the fertility thing, and also this notion that other bulls (other bovine, other domesticated animals)... Their imagery and their identities were used as part of the identity of Egyptian deities. The Egyptians are seeing all this happen. It's unmistakable to them. It might be a little bit of a stretch for us because we look at Egyptian religion and think, "That stuff is weird. Look at the weird pictures. Look at how they draw their gods. They're half human and half animal." They're doing this to connect deities with specific roles and specific ideas through the natural world—the things that the Egyptians can see and experience and understand. So to us that looks weird, but to the Egyptian, when you see... Going back to the frogs, that's unmistakable. You know who is in the crosshairs there.

Here with the livestock there is going to be an assortment of Egyptian deities that are going to be one-upped—that are going to be defeated, that are going to be under the thumb, that are going to be diminished and belittled by the Hebrew God. It's an unmistakable thing to an Egyptian witness to these sorts of events. It's not news to the Israelites, either, because they've been here for quite a long time (400 years), so they've gotten used to the trappings of the Egyptian state and the Egyptian religious ideas and the portrayal of the gods and the iconography. They're going to know when they see things in the natural world being overturned and upset and die (be afflicted and wind up dying) that this is going to be perceived by the Egyptians (rightly so) as an assault on their religion—an assault on their gods, an assault on what they believe about their deities. And it's a polemic for the superiority of Yahweh.

Plague number 6. This is the plague of boils. This is Exodus 9:8-12.

⁸ And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. ⁹ It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt." ¹⁰ So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh. And Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. ¹¹ And the magicians could not

stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians. ¹² But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Here we have the lector priests (the *hartumim*) involved in this scene again. They were not able to stand before Moses because of the boils. Now that could either be figurative (metaphorical) or they were so afflicted that they literally, physically couldn't stand. They're diminished, they're belittled, they're harmed, they're afflicted. There's no question as to who can do miracles and who cannot. This is the priestly class. This is the cast of priests that were supposed to be able to do spectacular things. I want to read a little bit from Currid and then another excerpt from something Gary Rendsburg has written. But we'll take Currid first here. He writes:

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The subsequent plague of boils (or possibly smallpox) has been identified as a polemic against Imhotep, the vizier of Dynasty 3 who was later deified as a god of medicine and healing. His chapel at Saqqara was used as a sanatorium where cripples flocked from all over Egypt during the Egyptian Late Period (ca. 712–343 b.c.) [MH: so quite late]. The problem with this identification is that Imhotep was deified and revered at a much later date than the exodus. Therefore, the sixth plague is incorrectly connected with him. Instead, the malady may have been directed against the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet, the lion-headed deity of plagues. She was responsible for epidemics in ancient Egypt, but ironically she also had the power to heal those who were visited by pestilence. The priests of Sekhmet, one of the oldest medical fraternities in antiquity, included both doctors and veterinary surgeons. Other gods regarded as divine physicians and healers included the Theban god Amon-Re, whom a text from Dynasty 19 describes as “he who dissolves evils and dispels ailments; a physician who heals the eye without having remedies, opening the eyes and driving away the squint ... Amon. Rescuing whom he desires ... he makes a lifetime long or shortens it.”

So Currid brings up the Imhotep angle (which I wanted to mention) and doesn't prefer it for obvious reasons, because it's chronologically anomalous. Rendsburg follows the same trajectory. This is from his essay, “Moses the Magician.” It's found in a book that I want to make you all aware of. This is a pricey book, but it is the best book on the exodus and the plagues and all that stuff to date in scholarly literature. That doesn't mean that its contributors believe in the events of the exodus or the reality of Moses. Some might, it's hard to say. Some would; some wouldn't. But this is an excellent volume. It's called *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*. It's from the *Quantitative Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, published by Springer. Springer is a major academic publisher in all sorts of disciplines. And it's 2015. This is a very recent work. So if you're interested in stuff about the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea and all of the approaches (naturalistic or

not, or religious), this is a terrific work. And Rendsburg's article here ("Moses the Magician") gets into the plague material. And he writes this:

While not lice, the boils [MH: he's talking about the plague of boils now] constitute a different skin affliction, which also would have rendered the Egyptian priests unable to serve the gods. To my mind, it is not a coincidence that the contest between the *hartumim* [MH: the magicians], on one hand, and Moses and Aaron, on the other, ends with the third plague of lice, and that the *hartumim* appear only once (in a cameo appearance as it were), during the telling of the sixth plague of boils. The attack on the lector-priests by extension represents an assault on the heart of Egyptian religion, for without priestly service in the temples, the cults are inoperative, the deities are ineffective, and all of Egypt descends into turmoil.

So he picks up on this phrase about the *hartumim* not being able to stand because of the boils before Moses and Aaron, and he takes that quite literally—that they are incapacitated. So it's not just that they are (like before, with the gnats and the flies) rendered unclean and they can't go into Egyptian religious sacred space and we have the neglect of the cult and the rituals and all that. This ups the ante. They can't even make it to work. They are physically incapacitated, and thereby (like he says) there's no priestly service in the temples. The cults are inoperative. The deities are ineffective. And it just creates turmoil in the whole land of Egypt. So this is a scatter-shot assault on Egyptian religion.

Plague #7 – the hail. This is Exodus 9:13-35. I'm going to read a portion of this. I'll read through verse 26. We read this:

¹³ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews [MH: which would have been really insulting at this point], "Let my people go, that they may serve me. ¹⁴ For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth.

In other words, God says, "I could have just killed you all off by this point, but I didn't. I kept you alive for a specific purpose."

¹⁶ But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. ¹⁸ Behold, about this time

tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. ¹⁹ Now therefore send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die when the hail falls on them.” ²⁰ Then whoever feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh [MH: Isn't that an ironic line?] hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses, ²¹ but whoever did not pay attention to the word of the LORD left his slaves and his livestock in the field.

²² Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, on man and beast and every plant of the field, in the land of Egypt.” ²³ Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the LORD rained hail upon the land of Egypt. ²⁴ There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. ²⁵ The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And the hail struck down every plant of the field and broke every tree of the field. ²⁶ Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were, was there no hail.

Again, the naturalistic explanation is going to fail at not only that point, but at a couple of points. If you want your view of the plagues to derive from the text, then you can't really default to the naturalistic perspective, which we've mentioned before. Let's take up a little bit here. You have in Exodus 9:27 (right after where I stopped there):

²⁷ Then Pharaoh sent and called Moses and Aaron and said to them, “This time I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.

So you have this apparent recognition of sin, but it's disingenuous repentance because Pharaoh does the very same thing seven verses later in verse 34. And this time it is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart. So his repentance here... If we kept reading... “Oh, Pharaoh got the message!” Well, actually he didn't. Because he's just going to be turned against the Lord anyway, despite all of this stuff up to this point. Currid writes:

The catastrophe of the hail was a mockery of the Egyptian heavenly deities...

“Don’t they have power to stop the hail?” If they were really gods, if they were really powerful... When I say “if they’re really gods,” yes, they’re spirit beings that exist and we have spiritual warfare in this and all that sort of stuff. What I mean is, if they were really powerful, if they really had authority to overrule what the God of the Hebrews is doing, wouldn’t they do it? Of course the point is, they don’t. They don’t have that ability. So Egyptian heavenly deities, like Nut, who is the female representative of the sky... She is in other texts and pictures the personification of the vault—the dome over the earth, the vault of heaven. Shu is the deity that supports the heavens, holds up the sky. Tefnut, the goddess of the moisture in the atmosphere... these are all heavenly deities. They are deities that are supposed to reign in the regions from which the hail comes. And they’re not doing anything. They can’t touch this, is the point.

So if you’re an Egyptian, you’re wondering, “Hey, why doesn’t one of these gods that we worship do something? And the only conclusion you can draw (because the Egyptians aren’t all of a sudden going to turn into atheists or modern rationalists here) is that “the God of the Hebrews is superior, and that means we’re in heap-big trouble.” Some of them didn’t even have to see the hail. As soon as it’s out of the mouth of Moses and Aaron, they’re listening. They’re obeying. They get their cattle and their slaves inside. God even gives them an out. He gives them a heads up, a warning. And a lot of Pharaoh’s own people don’t trust their own gods at this point. And they obey. They take the advice that Yahweh gives them through Moses and Aaron.

45:00 The eighth plague, the locusts, takes us into the tenth chapter. Exodus 10:1-20. I’ll read the first six verses. We have locusts in this plague.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants [MH: of course, Pharaoh had just hardened his own heart before, so it’s this back and forth thing we talked about earlier], that I may show these signs of mine among them,

In other words, God is stringing him out to enhance his own reputation outside of Egypt. If they had settled the matter quietly, after the first plague, God’s reputation is not going to ripple outside of Egypt. So this is part of the rationale for the hardening.

²and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.”

³So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh and said to him, “Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before

me? Let my people go, that they may serve me. ⁴For if you refuse to let my people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country, ⁵and they shall cover the face of the land, so that no one can see the land. And they shall eat what is left to you after the hail, and they shall eat every tree of yours that grows in the field, ⁶and they shall fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and of all the Egyptians, as neither your fathers nor your grandfathers have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day.” Then [Moses] turned and went out from Pharaoh.

In verses 7-11, you have another faux repentance—faux relenting—from Pharaoh. He offers to let the Israelite men go, keeping back the women and the children. This is disingenuous. Pharaoh’s no idiot. He knows that if he lets the men go, they’ll go out and do their thing in the desert, but they’re going to come back for their wives and their children. And then he can enslave them again, and say, “Look, I obeyed the Lord! I let you do this, so now we’re good, and you’re my slaves again, you’re my property again.” It’s disingenuous. Then you get to verse 12, and God isn’t buying Pharaoh’s offer:

¹²Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, so that they may come upon the land of Egypt and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left.” ¹³So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the LORD brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind had brought the locusts. ¹⁴The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. ¹⁵They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

So God is good on his word. Currid writes here in regard to this:

Locusts were a particularly nasty problem in ancient Egypt. On account of that danger, the ancient Egyptians worshiped the god Senehem, who was the divine protector against ravages from pests. An identification problem exists because Senehem appears to have been a minor deity in dynastic Egypt. Why Yahweh would have concerned himself to mock a subordinate deity is a problem. Perhaps protecting against grasshopper attack was a function not merely of one god, but of the gods in general. A hint of that possibility appears in the Tanis Stele from the reign of Taharqa (Dynasty 25), which speaks of “a fine field, which the gods protected against grasshoppers.”

50:00

So he's saying, we can identify a deity here (this Senehem). He was a minor deity in dynastic Egypt. But there appears to have been this concept that other gods more generally protected Egypt's food supply from grasshoppers. At least that was their belief. There's something else going on here, though, that associates this plague with the next one, and that's the plague of darkness. Exodus 10:15 gets obscured by the ESV, so I don't want to leave this plague without mentioning this. Because I do think there's a connection between this plague and the next, and the darkness plague definitely—no holds barred—is a direct attack on major deities in Egyptian thought. So since there's the connection between this one and the locusts, I don't think... What Currid brings up is a problem (a minor deity). I think it's less of a problem because it actually is going to marry the locusts to a major deity in the next plague. But anyway, let me look at Exodus 10:15. It says:

¹⁵ [The locusts] covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

Now think about that. Does that make any sense? Now it would make sense if locusts were black. Then if the whole land turned black, it would mean that the whole land was darkened. But locusts aren't black. Alright? In English (the ESV is not alone here), they've obscured something that helps make sense of the whole thing. If you actually look in the Hebrew text, the word *panim* (the word for face) is not what we get in this verse. "They covered the face of the whole land." It's not "They covered the *panim* of the whole land." Instead, the Hebrew text has, literally, "They covered the eye of the whole land, so that the land was darkened." To an Egyptian, the eye of the land was the sun. So what it really means is that there were so many locusts, it obscured the sun. In Egyptian writing and thought, "the eye of the sun" was also a metaphor for Re, who was a major deity. So that creates a link to the next plague, plague #9, in Exodus 10:21-29. I'll read a few verses of that.

²¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt." ²² So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. ²³ They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived.

There you have the distinguishing, and at this point, Pharaoh is going to break.

²⁴ Then Pharaoh called Moses and said, “Go, serve the LORD...”

So on and so forth. But again, the Lord hardens Pharaoh’s heart, because he has one more thing in mind: to multiply the judgment. That’s going to be the final plague, which we’ll get to in the next episode. But here in the plague of darkness in verse 23, this is clearly miraculous. All the people of Israel had light where they lived. And it hearkens back to the distinguishing of Exodus 8:22,

On that day, I will set apart the land of Goshen, where the people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there.

And then Exodus 9:4,

But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.

It’s very specific, as far as a distinguishing. God is not only showing himself as the master of Maat (the master of creation order through the de-creation of Egypt—the disassembling of its order—and really the natural world, the natural order), but he’s also moving a little bit beyond that by distinguishing his own people from the Egyptians. You can’t really get there in a naturalistic approach. Currid writes about darkness. And I’ve suggested that the darkness is in part... Yes, God commands Moses to stretch out his hand toward heaven. But the place has already been darkening because “the eye of the land” has been covered with locusts. So it’s sort of preparatory. Currid writes:

The ancient Egyptians regarded Amon-Re, the personification of the sun, as their chief deity. They believed that Amon-Re in his rising in the east symbolized new life and resurrection—in fact, they considered him to be the creator-god...

Just hold that point in your head. Every day, when the sun rose, to an Egyptian, it’s Amon-Re rising from the realm of the dead. It’s a resurrective image. So you have Amon-Re rising, and he gives new life to the land. The sun is going to be out, which means the plants are going to grow. Animals are going to eat. We’re going to eat. You have to have the sun, very obviously. So they believed that Amon-Re in his rising in the east symbolized new life and resurrection...

But when Amon-Re sank in the west [MH: when the sun set], he represented something different and antithetical; he symbolized death and the underworld. When Yahweh so willed (Exod. 10:21–29), the sun was darkened, and Amon-Re was hidden and unable to shine upon his worshipers. [MH: He’s unable to rise, in effect.] During the ninth plague Amon-Re did not rise again and did not give life; his realm was death, judgment, and hopelessness.

55:00

This is a big deal. I think of all the plagues... Obviously the Egyptians were going to get freaked out by all of this stuff, and they can tell that it's an assault against their religion, against their gods, against their Pharaoh, who is supposed to be a god (Horus incarnate, Re incarnate), but I think this one would have been the most frightening, because it's like, "Well, did he just kill Amon-Re?" Because they can't see the sun. The sun is darkened, and so there's something wrong here. Amon-Re—their "creator god," the highest, the chief deity in Egypt—is now subject to Yahweh. If you're an Egyptian, this is unmistakable imagery. You can't fail to notice (obviously) what's going on around you. You can't fail to comprehend what it means. It means that the God of the Hebrews is in complete, absolute, dominant control over the gods you worship. And you're just hoping that Pharaoh will let these people go so that Maat can be restored. Because if it isn't restored, you're going to die. The whole land is going to die. It's the end of Egypt.

So as an Egyptian, this is what's going through your head. A lot of this stuff is sort of distant from us because we don't know much about Egyptian religion, or it's just weird, or we don't understand the imagery and we think it's cartoonish. These images of Egyptian deities and these concepts of associating them with animals and other things in the natural world are designed to help them communicate the relationship of power that they don't understand—powers of the natural world, but also creation and how all this stuff is maintained. And they, like everybody else, attribute it to divine origin.

So it's a way to talk theology. It's a way to talk reality, talk worldview, talk your place in the natural world—for the Egyptians to communicate these ideas and link them to the religious system. This is what the plagues are. They are de-creation. They are an assault on Maat (the cosmic order) that Pharaoh is supposed to be in control of, and his lector priests (the ones that do all the rituals, the ones that are in charge of doing earthly acts that maintain Maat on earth on behalf of or with Pharaoh) are in the crosshairs, too. This is unmistakable as far as the de-creation—the assault on Maat. In turn, when all that stuff happens (when Maat is overturned), it's a very obvious assault (a polemic) on the gods and religious system of Egypt. It is shown to be inferior.

So this is why the plagues were what they were. When we read through Exodus 8-10, I think it helps us to get in the heads of the Egyptians and get in the heads of the Hebrews. Of course, Moses was raised in Egypt. He knows what all this stuff means. He knows what's going on here. He's picking up what the Lord is laying down. He can't miss it. And to an original reader (a biblical reader, somebody in this worldview when this stuff was written down, even after the events themselves), this is very obvious theological messaging. That is not to say it's unhistorical or pseudo-historical, or whatever. You're only going to be drawing that conclusion if you are a practical atheist. Scholars may not like to use the term "atheist." They might say that they believe in a god, or something like that, but they don't want him to act in history when it comes to the Exodus plagues.

Well, that's a little inconsistent, don't you think? I think it's really inconsistent. But that's where some scholars are—a lot of scholars are. And it's sort of understandable, but it's inconsistent at the end of the day.

1:00:00

But if you're not one of those, it's very obvious what's going on here with the plagues and how to read them, both in terms of real-time events—extensions of the power of God—and also their meaning, theologically. It's still a good message for us about the powers in heaven (supernatural powers)... Who's in control and who's not, who are really calling the shots here. So I think it's a good way to understand the big picture, to go through the plagues like this, both in terms of what they strike at directly and the very suggestive polemic against the gods of Egypt. So this is actually spiritual warfare. The plagues are spiritual warfare in the Old Testament. And anything like this gets put into that bucket. So hopefully when you read the plague accounts again, you'll remember some of these things and appreciate what's going on.

TS: Alright, Mike. Now that we're on the other side of the episode, what do you think? Are plagues your thing?

MH: Yeah, I like this stuff. I like Egyptology, yes. It's hard not to. [laughs]

TS: Absolutely. It would have been nice to have gotten to the Passover during Passover, and we didn't quite do that, but that's alright.

MH: Yeah, it'll be fresh in people's minds if they did.

TS: What's the Hebrew saying? It's Pesach what? It starts with S.

MH: It's PESS-akh.

TS: I'm from Texas, y'all; I say pay' sock. That's about as good as I get. [MH laughs] I apologize to all my Jewish brothers and sisters out there.

MH: Yeah, it ends with a consonant that we don't have in English. [laughs] Think of the "ch" like in Bach or loch. There you go.

TS: I enjoy it when you hit those Hebrew words and you say it, because it's fun to hear those words spoken as they are supposed to be. Because I can't do that. [MH laughs] Alright, Mike, so next week, are we just going to do the last plague or are you going to get into the Passover at all?

MH: Yeah, we'll do both. We'll do the final plague and the Passover.

TS: Alright, sounds good. We're looking forward to that. And with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.