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THE TEN PLAGUES

Introduction¹

The scene is repeated throughout the years, throughout the world. Jews gather for the *seder* and remove three drops of wine from their cups as they recite words that bring back recent as well as ancient memories: “Blood and fire and a smoking furnace!”

The Passover Haggadah had just brought a Midrash to the classical Confession Recited at the Bringing of the First Fruit.² This prayer “begins with the insult” of slavery “and ends with the praise”³ of Israel’s exodus from Egypt.⁴

And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand,
and with an outstretched arm, and with great terror,
and with signs, and with miracles.⁵

This verse introduces a theme that occupies several pages mid-rashic exegesis of the Ten Plagues.

Another interpretation of this verse:⁶ “strong hand” equals two;⁷ “outstretched arm” equals two; “great terror” equals two; “signs” equal two;⁸ and “miracles” equals two. These (five references to two plagues) constitute the ten plagues that the Holy One, Praised be He, brought on the Egyptians in Egypt. And these are: blood, frogs, lice, swarms,⁹ pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn. Rabbi Judah described them with a mnemonic: *d’tzakh adash b’ahav*.¹⁰

In this way the Haggadah presents the classical argument between Bible scholars: Should the Ten Plagues be viewed as five pairs of plagues or as three triads of plagues (plus one)?

I

It is possible to view the Ten Plagues as five pairs:

Blood and Frogs	(Plagues of the Water)
Lice and Swarms ¹¹	(Plagues of the Land)
Pestilence and Boils	(Plagues of Light!)
Hail and Locusts	(Plagues of the Sky)
Darkness and Death of the Firstborn	(Plagues of Darkness)

This analysis sees the Ten Plagues as a fulfillment of the Divine promise: “And against all the gods of Egypt I shall wreak judgments.”¹² The ancient pagans had three main gods: the earth, the sky, and the ocean. High in all pantheons, especially that of Egypt, ¹³ were the gods of light and darkness.

The Ten Plague chapters echo Genesis I. That chapter of Creation tells us that it is God himself who names day, night, heaven, seas, and earth.¹⁴ This naming shows his ownership; He created them and He named them, assigning them their duties.¹⁵ These five chief natural powers which man had worshipped in His stead are now punished.

Blood and frogs are both plagues of the water. “By this shall you know that I am the Lord. Behold I smite the *water* of the Nile with the rod in my hand and it shall turn to blood.¹⁶ To the Israelites the Nile had long been bloody; now the Egyptians found it so.¹⁷ The plague of frogs might have been a reminder of Heqet, the frog headed goddess who attended births.¹⁸ The Egyptians should have taken the hint: The Nile, where they had drowned Israel’s newborn boys, now swarmed with a killing fertility. “And Aaron stretched his hand over the *waters* of Egypt and the frogs came up.”¹⁹

Lice and swarms were plagues of the land. “And Aaron stretched forth his hand with its rod and he smote the *dust of the land* and it became lice on man and beast. All the *dust of the land* became lice. . . .”²⁰ To show that “I am the Lord *in the midst of the land*,”²¹ God sends swarms that afflict Egypt, but not Goshen where Israel dwells. “And in the entire land of Egypt, the *land* was destroyed because of the swarms.”²²

Pestilence and boils are plagues of the light. The ancient belief in a connection between luminaries and diseases is assumed²³ by the Tanakh. The sun and moon are potential sources of “the pestilence

that stalks in the dark, (and) the plague that ravages at noon.” Only because of God’s protecting Shadow, “the sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.”²⁴ The Talmud²⁵ records the ancient Temple prayer recited on Wednesday, the day the sun was created, in which Israel asked that children not be afflicted with that most feared disease, diphtheria.

The sun, even more than the Nile, was the chief Egyptian god. The name Pharaoh itself means the Great House (or earthly embodiment²⁶) of the Sun. Pharaoh was the sun’s incarnation. Umberto Cassuto, following a Midrashic hint, was tempted to translate Pharaoh’s words to the impudent Moses, “Behold, you stand in the presence of Ra (the sun god).”²⁷ It may be more than a coincidence that the name of this chief god of Egypt is identical in Hebrew with the word for “evil.”

The healing power of the sun is destroyed. The fifth plague destroys the choicest cattle, as the tenth destroys the first born. As the Haggadah notes, only this cattle plague is called “the hand of the Lord.”²⁸

The plague of boils²⁹ comes after Moses throws furnace soot skyward.³⁰ Cassuto sees the furnace soot as both the product and symbol of brick making. Fired bricks were made during the reign of Rameses II. But most bricks were sun baked. The furnace soot thrown at the sky is more than a reminder of Israelite labor; it is thrown to darken fires, even symbolically the fires of the sun. And it introduces the dreaded epidemic.

The next two plagues come from the sky: hail and locusts. “Stretch out your hand *towards heaven*,” Moses is commanded, “and there shall be hail in all the land of Egypt.”³¹ The locusts eat “whatever the hail leaves over. . . . And the locust *went up* over all the land. . . and it covered *the eye of the land* (poetic, says the Targum, for sun).”³²

The final two plagues involve darkness. A well known Midrash,³³ that obviously senses the parallels between the two plagues, suggests that just as death and darkness characterize the ultimate plague so death and darkness characterize the penultimate plague. Wicked Israelites, the Midrash writes, died during the plague of darkness which served in part to keep the tragedy from Egyptian knowledge. If the Egyptians had known they would have said, “Just as the plague passed over us, so has it passed over them.”³⁴ They would not have sensed the Divine hand and would have refused to free their Hebrew slaves. For the plague of darkness, Moses is commanded, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may

be *darkness* over the land of Egypt, *darkness* that can be felt.”³⁵ The final plague, the death of the firstborn, is announced for midnight;³⁶ it takes place at midnight;³⁷ and the Jews begin to leave the night.³⁸ The plagues end with a peroration: “It was a *Watch-night* for the Lord to take them out of the land of Egypt. This is the *Night* for the Lord watched by all the children of Israel throughout their generations.”³⁹

II

It is also possible to view the Ten Plagues as three triads (plus one).

This analysis sees the first nine plagues as a moral lesson in answer to Pharaoh’s question, “Who is the Lord that I should listen to his voice!”⁴¹ This, it turns out, is also the reader’s question.⁴²

Each Triad is announced with a brief speech that reveals the purpose of the following three plagues.⁴³ The first plague of each triad is always⁴⁴ announced in the morning. Twice we are told that Pharaoh is going out to the water at that time. The second plague of each triad is always⁴⁵ announced with the command, “Come to Pharaoh!” The final plague of each triad is always unannounced.⁴⁶

	First of Triad	Second of Triad	Third of Triad
	(morning warning)	(warning)	(No warning)
Triad I	Blood	Frogs	Lice
Triad II	Swarms ⁴⁰	Pestilence	Boils
Triad III	Hail	Locusts	Darkness

Figure 1-1: The Three Triads

Malbim suggests that the purpose of each triad is revealed by the first two plagues. “By the testimony of two witnesses is a matter established.”⁴⁷ The third unannounced plague is a punishment for not listening to the first two.

Just as the five-pair analysis sees the plagues as a destruction of the five chief natural *powers* which God has created, so does the three-triads⁴⁸ analysis reflect the destruction of what was created on the two triads of days of creation.⁴⁹ On the first day light was created: on the fourth day, creatures of light. The first plague of each triad takes place in the morning. On the second day sky and seas were created; on the fifth day, creatures of sky and seas. The second plague of each triad comes from the water or sky. On the third day, earth was created; on the sixth day, creatures of earth. The third plague in each triad mentions or implies dust of the earth. “Smite the

dust of the earth and it shall become lice⁵⁰ And [the soot] shall become *dust over all the land* of Egypt⁵¹ . . . causing . . . boils And the darkness could be felt.”⁵²

As Abarbanel notes each triad of plagues is announced. The first triad is announced

The Lord, God of the Hebrews sent me to you to say “Send out My people that they may serve Me in the desert. Now, behold, you have not listened thus far.” Thus said the Lord, “By this *shall you know that I am the Lord.*”⁵³

Pharaoh had asked, “Who is the Lord?” He is answered by plagues: “By this shall you know.”

The second triad of plagues begins with the same formula (“Send out My people”) and ends with the same educational rationale (“So that you shall know”) as the first triad.

Thus said the Lord: “Send out My people that they might serve Me. For if you will not send out My people I will send swarms against you . . . And I will set apart on that day the land of Goshen on which My people stand. There will be no swarms there, so that *you shall know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth.*”⁵⁴

The swarm⁵⁵ and the pestilence⁵⁶ affect Egyptians but not Israelites. Providence exists, not fate. God is not nature or a part of nature; He is the conscious, free controller of His creatures.

The final triad of plagues is announced with the same introductory formula as the two previous triads (“Send out My people”) but now ends with an expanded educational purpose. Pharaoh is not the main pupil; mankind is.

Thus said the Lord, God of the Hebrews, “Send out My people that they may serve Me. For this time I shall send all My plagues against your heart, your servants, and your people so that *you shall know that there is none like Me in all the earth.* . . . For this reason have I made you stand: to show you My power and that My name be declared throughout the earth.”⁵⁷

The final triad adds on to the first two. As in the first triad, Pharaoh learns “I am the Lord.” As in the second triad, Goshen and Israel are not struck by either hail⁵⁸ or darkness.⁵⁹ But this time in addition the punishment comes from the heavens. For the first time the target is the indispensable crop. For the first time it is not Pharaoh but God who hardens Pharaoh’s heart. He is no longer the main pupil. And for the first time the specific word “sin” is used to describe Egyptian deeds. “I have sinned,” Pharaoh confesses both

after the plague of hail⁶⁰ and after the plague of locusts.⁶¹ The key *phrase* of the last triad is “beyond comparison.” So that Pharaoh learn that God is beyond comparison⁶² he is sent an incomparable plague of hail⁶³ and an incomparable plague of locusts.⁶⁴

The Ten Plagues had begun with God not accepted in the Egyptian pantheon. They end the same way—because now that pantheon is no more. And now Egypt is ready to be punished for killing God’s firstborn son.

The five-pairs analysis sees the plagues as a war between God and the nature man has set up to equal and replace Him. The three-triad analysis sees the plagues as a lesson not so much to Pharaoh, or even the world, but to Israel.

so that you recite in your son and grandson’s ears what I did in Egypt and about the signs I placed therein so that *you* know that I am the Lord.⁶⁵

Which analysis is correct? The editor of the Haggadah chose both.

NOTES

1. The purpose of this article is to analyse two Tannaitic approaches to the literary structure of the Ten Plagues. These two approaches do not exhaust the subject. Already the Psalms, (78 and 105) in a poetic recitation of Jewish history, reorder and list the plagues. Biberfeld in “Mishpat Mitsraim Bithillim” (*Hamaayan* XV, 3, Nisan 5735, pp. 1-10) argues that “the prophet in chapter 78 chose only those plagues that endangered the lives of the Egyptians. . . . The order (in the Psalms) itself is ‘the most dangerous mentioned first’.” (pp. 3 & 4) Psalm 105, he feels, reorders and relists the plagues according to the *territorial* gestalt that dominate the chapter.

Although Philo lists all Ten Plagues, he too reorders them to agree with his theory that the four elements were used to carry out the Divine punishments. (*De Vita Mosis* I, 97) It should be noted that three insights were already present in Philo’s analysis. First, he notes some relationship between the Plagues and the elements. Second (like the classical commentators), he detects a triad structure. Third (like Moshe Greenberg), he senses that a more dramatic order of who performs the miracle would be: first, Aaron; then, Moses; and finally, God.

The Sifrei brings the structural analysis of the sages analysed in this article. The text is also found in the Midrash Tanaim and the Midrash Lekah Tov. This text became the common heritage of the Jewish people by being included in the Passover Haggadah. The triad structure implicitly advanced by Rabbi Judah is made explicit by the Rashbam (to Exodus 7: 26): “Twice Moses warned Pharaoh, the third time he did not. This is the style in the entire series: in every group of three, the third carries no warning.” Bahya, Sforno, and Abarbanel make the same stylistic observation. Abarbanel notes in addition that each triad is introduced by a purpose clause beginning “*L’maan*-so that.” According to Abarbanel, the first triad of plagues demonstrate God’s existence; the second triad, His providence; and the final triad, His ability to alter nature.

Modern critics, of course, have their own well known way of analysing style, the documentary hypothesis. Although Brevard Childs protests that it is possible to analyse the Ten Plagues according to the five-pair “nature of the plagues” format or three-triad

“literary form” and still maintain adherence to Source theory, in practice Childs totally ignores the five-pair format and pays scant attention to the three-triad approach. Greenberg, who rejects the traditional Sources for two of his own, devotes considerable space to the triad approach and ignores the five-pair analysis. The critics are more desirous of discovering the “original plague epic” in Psalms.

It is more natural that Cassuto, who rejects the Documentary Hypothesis, would spend time examining the dual structure of the Ten Plagues, both the three-triad “literary form” and “according to the nature of the plagues,” the five-pairs. The first pair (blood-frogs) pertain to the Nile. The second pair (gnats-swarm of flies) comprises plagues that resemble each other The third pair (pestilence-boils) likewise consists of two similar plagues The fourth pair (hail-locusts) represents two sources of damage to crops. The last group (darkness-plague of darkness) contains two kinds of darkness. M.D. Cassuto *Perush al Sefer Shmot*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1959, p. 61.”

2. Deuteronomy 26: 5-10.
3. *Mathil Bignut Um'sayem B'shevah*.
4. The Haggadah written or rewritten after the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of bringing the first fruit quotes only the first four sentences of the Confession which now ends with the Exodus. Biblically, the Confession “ends with the praise” of Israel’s coming to the Temple.
5. Deuteronomy 26:8.
6. Literally, “another thing.”
7. The fact that “strong hand” consists of two words is interpreted by the Midrash as an indication of two plagues.
8. The fact that “signs” is plural and the minimum plural is two is interpreted by the Midrash as an indication of two plagues.
9. There is an argument (*Shmot Rabbah* 11:3) between Rabbi Nehemiah and his contemporary Rabbi Judah concerning the nature of these swarms. Rabbi Nehemiah thinks they are swarms of hornets or mosquitoes; Rabbi Judah thinks they are swarms of wild beasts. Rabbi Nehemiah’s view is consistent with the opinion that sees the plagues as a series of five dyads. Lice and insects are quite similar. Rabbi Nehemiah might be the anonymous First Teacher (Tana Kama) who argues with Rabbi Judah in our Haggadah.
10. Unlike most mnemonics that have some independent though usually irrelevant meaning, this mnemonic is simply composed of the first Hebrew letters of the first three, second three, and final four plagues. The Tosafot Yom Tov (*Avot* 5:4) attempts to find meaning in the mnemonic.

The Midrash recited at the Bringing of the First Fruit is already considered traditional by the Mishnah (*Pesahim* 10: 4). Finkelstein argues (*Harvard Theological Review* XXXI, pp. 291-317) that the Midrash itself is pre-Maccabean but that this particular paragraph of the Ten Plagues is a much later addition as its introduction (beginning with, “Another interpretation”) indicates. “But,” notes Haggadah historian Daniel Goldschmidt.

“this [paragraph on the Ten Plagues] does not differ in character from all the homiletical interpretations that proceed it. It appears in all Haggadah manuscripts and Halakhic Midrashim (Sifrei, Midrash Tannaim, Midrash Lekah Tov). It therefore seems likely that it was learned together with the [Confessional] Midrash. The mnemonic of Rabbi Judah . . . (2nd century C.E.) is also found in all sources. The names of the plagues, however, are not listed there. Nor are the plagues named in some Geniza fragments. This [listing of the ten Plagues by name] seems to be a later addition.” (*The Passover Haggadah: Its Sources and History*, p. 46).

Goldschmidt estimates that the final editing of the Midrash into the Haggadah text we have today took place in the 7th century C.E.

11. “Swarms” here are probably swarms of hornets and mosquitoes. See note 9.
12. Exodus 12: 12.
13. W. Max Muller, *The Mythology of All Races, Volume XII*. Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1918.

14. Note that the Four Elements have similarities to these five natural powers: earth, air, (sky), fire (light, mystics would include darkness), and water (seas). Cf. with Nahmanides to Genesis 1:2.
15. See Rashi and S.R. Hirsch to Genesis 1: 5.
16. Exodus 7: 17.
17. See Abarbanel.
18. "Heqet or Heqit... a goddess with the shape or head of a frog... associated with her neighbor Khnum as the creator whence she became a protector at birth... Khnum was... represented as a ram or ram-headed, and later he sometimes receives four ram's heads, probably symbolizing the four sources of the Nile." Muller, *op. cit.* pp. 133-5.
19. Exodus 8: 2.
20. Exodus 8: 13.
21. Exodus 8: 18.
22. Exodus 8: 20.
23. The Talmud (b. *Pe'sahim* 111a) also quotes this ancient belief. Amos Chacham writes, "It is irrelevant to ask whether these things agree with modern medical knowledge, since regardless of this, 'the Torah must speak the language of (contemporary) man.'" *Da'at Mikra: Thillim II*, p. 445. Of course, the positive benefits of sunshine and moonlight are recognized by the Torah: "The bounteous yield of the sun and the bounteous crops of the moons." (Deuteronomy 33: 14.)
24. Psalms 91: 6 and 121: 6. Note that the same word, *dever*, for pestilence is used in both Psalms and Exodus.
25. b. Taanit 27b.
26. See Muller *op. cit.*
27. Exodus 10: 10.
28. Exodus 9: 3.
29. The Hebrew word *a'ba'buot* is similar in meaning and possibly a cognate to buboes.
30. Exodus 9:8.
31. Exodus 9:22.
32. Exodus 10: 12, 14-15.
33. *Shmot Rabbah* 14: 3.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Exodus 10: 21.
36. Exodus 11: 4.
37. Exodus 12: 29.
38. Exodus 12: 30-31.
39. Exodus 12: 42.
40. Rabbi Judah thinks they are swarms of wild beasts. See note 9.
41. Exodus 5: 2.
42. Exodus 10: 2.
43. See Abarbanel.
44. Exodus 7: 15; 8: 16; 9: 13.
45. Exodus 7: 26; 9: 1; 10: 1.
46. See Rashbam to Exodus 7: 26.
47. Deuteronomy 19: 15.
48. S.R. Hirsch suggests that the purpose of the three-fold punishment is to repay the Egyptians for the three-fold aspects of slavery announced to Abraham at the Covenant Between the Pieces: "Know for certain that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and they shall serve them, and they shall afflict them." (Genesis 15: 13) This interpretation, however, becomes very strained when Hirsch tries to match the triads to this pattern. It is hard to accept frogs, pestilence, and locusts as measure-for-measure punishments for servitude.
49. Cf. to *Bereshit Rabbah* 11: 8.
50. Exodus 8: 13.

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51. Exodus 9: 9.
52. Exodus 10: 21. Josephus comments (*Antiquities* 2.14.5), “The darkness was so thick that their eyes were blinded by it and their breath choked.” By implication this is dust or sand. See Cassuto. Cf. Ibn Ezra.
53. Exodus 7: 16-17.
54. Exodus 8: 16-18.
55. Exodus 8: 19.
56. Exodus 9: 4.
57. Exodus 9: 13-14, 16.
58. Exodus 9: 26.
59. Exodus 10: 23.
60. Exodus 9: 27.
61. Exodus 10: 16.
62. Exodus 9: 14.
63. Exodus 9: 24.
64. Exodus 10: 14.
65. Exodus 10:2.