**Why Are There 10 Plagues?**

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(00:00)

Jon: A river of blood, an infestation of frogs, gnats, flies, disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness. Today we're going to talk through what we commonly call the 10 plagues.

Tim: The 10 acts of de-creation that God brings upon Egypt in order to display his character and name as the liberator of the oppressed.

Jon: We're going to look at how each of these plagues, as we call them, are connected to the biblical idea of de-creation, how God is holding the order of the universe together. (00:01:00) But when people plant their flag in violence and oppression, he'll let it all go.

Tim: So every one of these is both a demonstration of Yahweh's power as author of creation, but it's a de-creation story on every level.

Jon: And it's intense because this isn't merely a showdown with one single corrupt ruler. This narrative is painted as a showdown with evil itself.

Tim: Pharaoh and Egypt represent the height of corruption and human rebellion partnered with spiritual rebellion. So when God brings the 10 acts of de-creation on Egypt, God says it's a judgment against Pharaoh and the gods, the gods of Egypt.

Jon: Today on the podcast, we are finishing the first movements of the Exodus scroll, tracing the theme of God's name. What does the God of the Bible do when he is faced with horrendous evil?

Tim: There are times when God deals with severe justice against human rebellion and evil. And you'll learn something about someone's character for how they respond to really (00:02:00) horrendous evil.

Jon: I'm Jon Collins. This is BibleProject podcast. And today I talk with Dr. Timothy Mackie, tracing the name. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

Hey, Tim.

Tim: Hey, Jon.

Jon: We are in Exodus.

Tim: Yes, we are so in Exodus.

Jon: We are so in Exodus. We are actually still in the first movement of Exodus. Exodus is broken up into three movements. We're going through each of them, tracing a pattern, a theme pattern. In this movement, it starts at the beginning of Exodus where we are introduced to the big bad Pharaoh, and the nation of Israel multiplying, being fruitful, and the Pharaoh being threatened, him trying to take them out by killing the babies. Well, he had three different—

Tim: Three attempts.

Jon: Three attempts to take them out. The last one is, "Let's throw the babies in the Nile River." (00:03:00) And that's where we're introduced to Moses. Moses grows up in Pharaoh's household, and his whole story of being called by God, told God's name, and then commissioned by God to go and rescue Israel from the big bad Egypt. And all of that is so that God's name could be known by Israel and by all the other nations. This is the kind of God who will rescue the oppressed and is doing something in the world through this people.

Tim: Good summary. That's great. The focus on the name is key because it's one of Moses's objections—why he doesn't want to be the one sent by God to lead the people out of Egypt. He says, "If people ask what your name is, what will I even tell them?" And then you get the description and explanation of the name Yahweh and its meaning. And we talked about that at length. But then when Moses finally does go to the king of Egypt, the first response of the king of Egypt is, "I don't recognize Yahweh—" (00:04:00)

Jon: "Who is this Yahweh?”

Tim: "Who is Yahweh? That's not a name of any god I know. I don't acknowledge him. I don't know that name." So the recognition of the name becomes really foregrounded there by the narrator. So as you're saying, Pharaoh's increasing stubbornness, increasing violence and oppression of the people is countered by an increasing intensity of God's power displayed through these acts of de-creation, which is our code word for when God hands creation over and allows it to start splintering back into chaos and disarray. It's undoing the Genesis 1 created order, as it were. And that's what we're going to be exploring today is the 10 acts of de-creation that God brings upon Egypt in order to display his character and name as the liberator of the oppressed.

Jon: And what helps center me and why (00:05:00) this is important is to think about that God's name isn't so much about God caring that he looks good or some insecurity he has. It's that the God of the Bible is presented as the source of all life.

Tim: And order.

Jon: An order. And the sustainer of life and order.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: So knowing the name is synonymous with the idea of flourishing and having life and being at the center of how everything ought to work, or the symbol of eating of the tree of life in the Genesis stories. So blessing, flourishing, peace, all this stuff. The world as it ought to be requires that you are connected to the source of life.

Tim: Yeah, that's one key piece. So to not acknowledge (00:06:00) Yahweh is almost to embrace a contradiction. To say, "I don't acknowledge Yahweh," you're using vocal cords and breath that comes to you as a gift from Yahweh the creator of all that is. At least within the worldview of the biblical story, you are contradicting your own existence by not acknowledging. Pharaoh is contradicting his own existence. That's one thing.

But another thing is Pharaoh has set himself up as a rival to Yahweh. There's some cultural background. Egyptian kings were believed and claim to be the incarnation of their most high gods, which changed names and forms over time. But Re or Ra (the sun god) was often an image of that. So that's one piece.

But second is Pharaoh is setting himself up as this distorted image of God, as a ruler. Because what humans are made to do is to rule in Genesis 1. So you have a ruler (00:07:00) who is not only just doing bad things, but he is fundamentally misrepresenting the rule and character of God over—

Jon: He's representing the rule of another god.

Tim: Totally. Yeah, of the gods of Egypt. So when God brings the 10 acts of de-creation on Egypt, and the culminating one in chapter 12, which we'll look at today, God says it's a judgment against Pharaoh and the gods, the gods of Egypt. So this isn't like run-of-the-mill human stupidity and poor decision-making. Pharaoh in Egypt represents the height of corruption and human rebellion partnered with spiritual rebellion and the archetypal foe of Yahweh among the nations. So Yahweh plays hardball. Pharaoh wants to play hardball—

Jon: He takes the gloves off.

Tim: Yahweh takes the gloves off. So this is important because the narrative is giving us a foundation portrait of Yahweh's judgment against human evil, his anger, and judgment on human evil. (00:08:00) It's also important that this is not like an everyday thing. This is not—

Jon: This is not what I should expect when I make a mistake.

Tim: Yeah. As we'll go on into the story, there are times when God deals with severe justice against human rebellion and evil. And you'll learn something about someone's character for how they respond to really horrendous evil. But just because somebody responds to horrendous evil in a certain way doesn't mean they will always respond that way to every act of evil they come across.

Jon: Yeah. We learned that Yahweh is patient and that he wants to forgive. So there's that part of his character ...

Tim: Also.

Jon: ... that we're going to see a lot throughout these stories. But there are moments where he says, "Enough is enough. I'm going to let this all fall apart on itself."

Tim: Yeah. And that's the part of the portrait of God's character we're looking at today. (00:09:00) You know, I remember ... it's a really vivid memory I have when I was doing my doctoral work at University of Wisconsin and there was a Muslim student in a class I was in. We were talking about the portrait of God's character in the Torah and especially in the wilderness narratives, and she was processing that.

So we had this great conversation about how the Hebrew Bible contains all these different stories and they render a portrait of God ... That different stories emphasize different parts of God's character. And I think the challenge that we have is pulling all the pieces together into a coherent mosaic, as it were. Because it can feel like God is really merciful towards some people who don't deserve it and then brings the hammer on other people where you go, "I maybe would have been a little more lenient."

So the challenge is really knowing how to hold these together. I'll never forget that conversation because somehow it just clicked for me. (00:10:00) And what I appreciated about this other student's observations was that she didn't have ... I mean, she grew up with the Quran, and the Hebrew Scriptures are a part of Muslim Scripture, but at the same time, she believed Muhammad and the Quran is the culmination of Allah’s revealing of God's character. But she really cared about the Hebrew Scriptures and wanted to understand them. She was just a great dialogue partner to have for that conversation. And I'll never forget that.

But that's the challenge we have here is we want to honor this portrait of God's intense justice in these stories of the plagues on Egypt, while also not forgetting they’re just one section of a bigger mosaic that we need to also see God's character within.

Jon: And I think the same struggle happens when we read the flood narrative in Genesis 5. And other acts of justice throughout the Bible, not just here. I'm really excited about you explaining how these are connected to de-creation. (00:11:00) Because they just seem like, “Hey, let's roll the dice and see what kind of plague is going to show up.” Like God has some plague dice and he's like, "All right, we'll get some locusts."

Tim: I hear that. There are still things that puzzle me about the plagues. But I have learned a lot in the last few years that I'm excited to talk about with you.

Jon: Okay.

**Section break (00:11:26)**

Tim: So the section of Exodus that contains the lead up story to the first plague ... Actually, we should say the word “plagues” ... There's a variety of words used in the stories to talk about what God is doing, what these 10 things are. So they're sometimes called plagues, and that's translating a word used in the story from the Hebrew word "*nagaph*" which means "to hit" or "to strike."

There's another word that's spelled with real similar letters pronounced "*naga*" instead of "*nagaph*." That’s "strike." *Naga* means "to touch" but also can mean “to touch intensely.” So also “to strike.” And then also these acts are called either signs or wonders, symbolic acts of power that point to the greater power of the one who can do such signs and wonders, that kind of thing.

But the word "plagues" has been the one that has stuck throughout, at least in our English-speaking traditions. And “plague” refers to a disease, in my mind.

Jon: Most often, yeah.

Tim: And only one of the 10 plagues is a disease.

Jon: I guess you're right. Exclusively (00:13:00) do we say plague when we mean disease.

Tim: Disease, yeah. So I've thought of other things to call these. Like the 10 strikes or the 10 acts of de-creation or something. But it's just worth noticing that the word "plague" technically only refers to one of the 10, not all of them. So the 10 strikes.

The story begins with after Aaron and Moses went to Pharaoh and Pharaoh said, "I don't acknowledge Yahweh." Then in chapter 5 and 6 Pharaoh turned up the intensity of the slavery on Israel. More bricks, less straw to make the bricks. So Moses and Aaron go back to Yahweh and Yahweh says, "I told you this was going to get intense, and it's about to get more so." About to open up a can. "So go back to Pharaoh and tell him again, ‘Let my people go.’”

That's where we pick up in Exodus 7. This is where we concluded our last conversation. Moses and Aaron go back to Pharaoh and they say, (00:14:00) "Let the people go." And Pharaoh says, "Nope." So Yahweh says, "Listen, I'm about to stretch out my hand against Egypt and the Egyptians will come to recognize, to acknowledge, that I am Yahweh." So here we begin the 10 plagues.

So what's interesting about the 10 plagues is they're structured in a really highly designed way in terms of their literary design. There's 10 total, but those 10 are divided up into three groups of three, making nine, and then the 10th and final one is kind of set apart from those three groups of three. So in order, they are famously: blood. The Nile turns to blood.

Jon: Number one.

Tim: Number one. Number two: frogs come up out of the Nile and crawl into everybody's houses and it's nasty. Number three: gnats come fly and cover everything. Fourth: flies come and cover everything. Fifth is plague. Like an actual disease. The sixth is (00:15:00) boils. Actual skin boils. The seventh is hailstones fall and destroy all the crops. Eighth is locusts come and eat everything that the hail didn't destroy. And then the ninth is darkness over the land. And then that sets you up for the10th, which is the death of the firstborn. And that links all the way back to the death of the firstborn sons of Israel. Pharaoh long ago began with back in chapter 1.

Jon: Pharaoh was tossing the boys in the river.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. So those are the 10. What's interesting is that the—

Jon: I feel like we need the 10 days of Christmas song or something to remember these. [singing] Five livestock plagues.

Tim: That would be great. I'm sure somebody's done it.

Jon: What's number four?

Tim: Number four is the flies.

Jon: Four buzzing flies. Three—

Tim: Three terrible gnats. (00:16:00)

Jon: Two leaping frogs.

Tim: And the Nile is full of icky blood. Something like that.

Jon: Something like that.

Tim: All right. Okay. So the first nine plagues come at a pretty fast pace. Then the 10th one is, as I said, set apart. The 10th one has three whole long chapters dedicated to it. Whereas the first nine get anywhere from a third of a chapter to a quarter of a chapter kind of thing. But we're talking about Exodus 7 through 10 are the plagues.

So here's what's fascinating. If you start studying patterns of repeated words, you'll see that just like the six days of Genesis are organized—

Jon: You’re talking about Genesis 1, God creates order in six days.

Tim: In the seven-day creation narrative that goes from Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 2:3, that narrative has six days of God working. And the arrangement of (00:17:00) those six days is super intentional. And we've talked about that at length. But the organization of them into triads, two groups of three, and then the things match and symmetry is going forward. There is an identical design to these nine plagues that—

Jon: So there's three groups.

Tim: There's three triads. So it goes the blood, the frogs, the gnats. That's triad one. The flies, the plague, the boils: triad two. The hail, the locusts, the darkness: that’s triad three. I can't make this stuff up. There are symmetrically repeating phrases that link these together, both sideways and ...

Jon: Vertically.

Tim: ... vertically.

Jon: If you put them in a grid.

Tim: If you put them in a grid. That's right. For example, the three triads, the first one of each triad happens in the morning.

Jon: So each triad begins with a plague in the morning or strike in the morning.

Tim: Exactly. The plague of blood, the plague of the flies, (00:18:00) the plague of the hail, that is plagues one, four, and seven all have a little moment where they're introduced with a narrative saying, "And God said to Moses, 'In the morning ...'" And then all of them take place where Pharaoh is going out to the river, or to the waters, and Moses is told to go meet Pharaoh by the waters. And it's only in the morning. And it's only plagues one, four, and seven. So it's very conspicuous.

Jon: Very clearly marking out we're starting a new set of plagues.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. So that act right there divides the nine.

Jon: And what a wonderful place to showdown with Pharaoh at the Nile!

Tim: Exactly. The first plague will take place at the Nile with blood, but also it circles back to what Pharaoh did with the Israelite boys on the Nile. He just tossed them into the waters. So it makes all of the nine plagues a counter to Pharaoh's evil back in chapter 1. That's one thing.

The first of each triad, plagues one, four, and seven all have the phrase (00:19:00) "so that y'all will know that I am Yahweh." That's a key phrase ...

Jon: And that's what we're tracing.

Tim: ... that we've been tracing—the name of Yahweh. That's right. When you go to the second plague in each triad, that is plagues two, five, and eight, the frogs, plague on the livestock, and the locusts, these all take place with Moses going to meet Pharaoh in his house. So each one of them is Moses going to Pharaoh not out by the shore. That's one, four, and seven. Plagues two, five, and eight is all Moses going into Pharaoh's house and they're demanding that the people be let go.

Then the third in each triad, plagues three, six, and nine, which is gnats, boils, and darkness, there's no warning. We're not told of when how or where Moses went to Pharaoh—

Jon: Because normally Moses comes and says, "Hey, you're going to get another one. Here's a chance to let us go."

Tim: Totally, yes.

Jon: And the third strike of each triad, there's no warning.

Tim: There's no warning. (00:20:00) It's just, "Hey, you aren't letting my people go, boom. Here, I'm going to do this." And the plague comes without any lead up time. So that's interesting just right there. There are also hyperlinks and design features that knit each of the three together. Plagues one, two, and three ...

Jon: As units.

Tim: ... are all a little unit that take place near the Nile. Plagues four, five, and six are all bound together. Plagues seven, eight, and nine are really long, and every one of them has a line that says, "When the hail comes," it says, "Hail will fall like no hail has ever fallen before, and no one has seen it, and no one will ever see anything like it again.” “When the locusts come, there will be more locusts, more than anyone has ever seen before and no one will ever see that many again." And then with the darkness, it was that the Egyptians could not see while the Israelites could see in the darkness.

So the first two, the hail and the locust were no one has ever seen (00:21:00) anything like this, and then the ninth plague is and the Egyptians just straight up couldn't see anything at all. So it's a funny little line—

Jon: So the last triad is kind of he ramps it up to—

Tim: Ramps it up. Yeah, exactly. So there actually are lots of other things here but they're all united. This was actually something that Carissa on our scholar team pointed out to me was that in the 10 plagues chapters, from the first plague on through the 10th, the phrase "you will know that I am Yahweh" appears, wait for it, how many times? Seven times.

So once the plagues start, there are seven announcements that this is happening "so that Pharaoh will know that I'm Yahweh" or "Egypt will know that I'm Yahweh," or "the Israelites shall know that I'm Yahweh." So that also creates a nice cohesion through these as well. So the main takeaway is ... Well, I don't know. You tell me. (00:22:00)

Jon: Well, with that last one that the authors would make sure that there's seven times that the phrase "you will know what I'm Yahweh" in this section seems to mean that they think that pattern, that theme of knowing the name, is kind of of ultimate importance in this section.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Seven symbolizes completion.

Tim: Yeah, a complete statement of something.

Jon: So to do it seven times is to say, like, "Really pay attention to this idea."

Tim: Just to recall, the seven-day symbolism begins in the first story in the Hebrew Bible with the seven-day creation story. And the word "seven" is spelled with the same Hebrew letters as the word "to be filled up" or "complete." So things repeating in numbers of seven is a statement of wholeness or completeness, or climactic importance or something like that. Yeah, that's right.

Jon: And all of this symmetry (00:23:00) and ordering of the 10 plagues with the three sets of three plus one, one, it helps you maybe remember them and the significance of them.

Tim: That's a big part of it.

Jon: That’s a huge part of it.

Tim: The literary design of biblical literature, a big part of it is aimed at helping you both memorize it, eat more easily, once you see its structure, and then it helps you recite it in your mind as you meditate on it.

Jon: Yeah. I'm already starting to be able to categorize it in my mind a little bit better than before. Just hard to remember the 10 acts of—

Tim: (inaudible - 00:23:35)

Jon: Yeah, crazy making that happen. One takeaway is that each set of three begins in the morning—

Tim: Like day one of creation.

Jon: Like day one of creation. And the first triad not only starts in the morning, but it happens at the Nile River, and then all three happened at the Nile River. And starting at the Nile River, the showdown with Pharaoh at the Nile River is really important, like we just said. (00:24:00) This is where he did his act of just cruel injustice and murder.

And then that last set of three, the fact that there's no warning, the volume is turned up, there's something probably to meditate on there too. So lots of cool stuff going on. But let's go through them because I want you to show me how each of these are connected to de-creation and any other cool things that you want to bring up.

Tim: Deal.

**Section break (00:24:31)**

Tim: Okay, plague number one, the river turns to blood. Yuck.

Jon: That's gross.

Tim: This is Exodus 7:15. "And the Lord said to Moses 'Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he's going out to the water ...'" I think, first of all, it circles back to Pharaoh long ago throwing the baby Israelite boys into the water. Also, and this is just in the background but assumed by the biblical authors, is the Nile was the lifeline of—

Jon: The Egyptian culture.

Tim: Yeah. Egyptian agriculture, therefore, their economy, therefore, their empire, it was all funded and sustained by this river. So the Nile and the source of the Nile was viewed as a divine presence and power. The river is the embodiment of a deity. And Pharaoh, as the one who brings order and maintains order of the land, his exercise of authority over the river is a big part of Egyptian religion and culture and so on. (00:26:00) Lots of water rituals.

Jon: So to really go for the jugular on the first one with the "I'm just going to turn your lifeline into blood."

Tim: Yeah, totally. Which, certainly it's, again, echoing back to the innocent blood of the Israelite boys, even though tossing a baby into the water and it drowning you likely wouldn't see blood in the water, but the image is Pharaoh filled the river with dead bodies and Yahweh is going—

Jon: The blood of the innocent.

Tim: The blood of the innocent is crying out. Yeah, that's exactly what's going on. So this is the blood of Abel crying out, the blood of those boys. So that's all in the background when God says to Moses, "Go out to Pharaoh in the morning as he's going out to the river." To do what? That doesn't matter. The point is Pharaoh is by the river. And that creates the symbolic stage, so to speak. "Go meet him on the bank of the Nile. Take the staff that turned into a snake—"

Jon: When Moses met (00:27:00) with Yahweh or the Angel of Yahweh at the *senah* bush, one of the objections was—

Tim: "What if the people don't believe me?"

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So God gives Moses three signs. One of them is "throw your staff on the ground and it'll become a snake. And then pick it up and it'll become a staff again." Actually, in the narrative, we didn't read it, Moses just did that same sign in front of Pharaoh just in the paragraph before where we're reading right now.

Jon: And that's where it turns into not just a snake, but it turns into a ...

Tim: Sea monster.

Jon: ... sea monster. The *tannin*?

Tim: Yeah. Oh, wow. Good memory, Jon.

Jon: Yay.

Tim: Hebrew vocab coming out. So that's all about portraying Moses as the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15.

Jon: Crushes the snake.

Tim: The who can handle the snake. So Moses is depicted as the one with power over the snake. And then in this narrative, he is confronting the king who is (00:28:00) the embodiment of sneaky evil in the land. So take that snake staff and say to him, "Yahweh, *Elohim* of the Hebrews, sent me saying, 'Let my people go to worship me in the wilderness' but you haven't listened. So this is what Yahweh says. By this you will know that I am Yahweh." There’s our first of seven times that phrase will be used in the plagues. "I'll strike the water in the Nile with the staff in my hand and it will turn to blood." So the water becomes undrinkable. That's a big emphasis. You can't drink blood. So that's interesting.

The other thing is you're told after the water turns to blood that seven days pass. You're just randomly told that at the end of this plague. So it's the first plague—

Jon: That lasts for seven days.

Tim: And it begins in the morning, which echoes the first day of creation, which is the—God's light creates (00:29:00) night and day, morning and evening. And then it ends with the echo of the seventh day.

Jon: There's a completeness in this plague itself.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Goes for the jugular. This is what your whole economy is based on, this represents your evil being turned back against you. This should do it.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. But it doesn't. Pharaoh's heart is hard and he won't let the people go. Second plague. God says, "Let my people go. And if you don't, frogs will come up out of the land." Actually, the word "frog" is a loanword in Hebrew. It's not—

Jon: In the Hebrew Bible? What do you mean loanword?

Tim: Sorry. You know how in English we have words that don't have a history back in English? They are words imported from another language.

Jon: Oh, right.

Tim: So we have tons of ancient Greek and Hebrew words in English like “baptism” and stuff like that. "Angels" that's a Greek word spelled with English letters. (00:30:00) There are lots of ancient Near Eastern loanwords in classical Hebrew.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: So the Hebrew word is “*tsephardea*.”

Jon: So loanword means it has no Hebrew origin. It was imported in.

Tim: It was imported in. So let's see. I'm looking it up in *The Hebrew Aramaic Lexicon* by Kohler and Baumgartner. And it's either a loanword from Aramaic or a loanword from Arabic. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic are the three cousin languages of what's called ancient Semitic—

Jon: Semitic languages.

Tim: Yeah, Semitic languages. And then there are some other relatives. But kind of the way Italian and French and Spanish ...

Jon: Are all like Latin cousins.

Tim: ... are all linked together, so Aramaic ... So often there's Arabic loanwords in Biblical Hebrew or Aramaic loanwords in Biblical Hebrew. Anyway, just kind of interesting. It's a weird-looking Hebrew word. It's spelled (00:31:00) way different than the way Hebrew letters are often spelt. *Tsephardeim*. So here what's interesting is frogs—are they a land creature or are they a sea creature?

Jon: Hmm, yes.

Tim: In Genesis 1, God makes a very clear separation between the land and the sea. That's a part of the order of creation, the boundary in the land.

Jon: The fish go in the fish place and the mammals go in the land place. So these amphibians—

Tim: Totally. So our word “amphibian” is a biological term, but it's a Greek word.

Jon: Is it?

Tim: Yeah. The word “*amphiboles*” ... I'll let you look it up. But it's the Greek word for "both," or "both and." I just know this because it's used in New Testament Greek to mean two things together.

Jon: Having two modes of existence. *Amphibia* is the Greek.

Tim: *Amphibia*.

Jon: It can mean living a double life. (00:32:00) *Amphi* (both kinds) and the *bia* is *bios* (life).

Tim: Ah, totally.

Jon: Both kinds of life.

Tim: Yeah, it lives on the land and it lives on the sea. So the—

Jon: It's got two lives.

Tim: Yeah, it's got two lives. So the point is that the frogs represent a creature that erase the boundary between land and sea.

Jon: In the biblical imagination, frogs are like this representation of, yes, God ordered things but there are creatures that kind of mess with that order.

Tim: That's right. That's one thing. The second is something you're told is that all of a sudden the language about the sea creatures in Genesis 1 starts coming out. So you're told the Nile will swarm with frogs. It's the word “*sharats*.” It's exactly what God says in Genesis 1. "Let the waters swarm with every swarming creature." *Sharats*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So God is bringing (00:33:00) out a creature that is swarming, but it swarms in the waters and on the land. So it's a hybrid creature.

Jon: Erasing the boundary.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. And that boundary between land and sea is super important in biblical cosmology.

Jon: It creates the place where humans can live, which is separate from the chaotic sea where you can't live out there.

Tim: That's right. That's interesting.

Jon: They didn't know about the city of Atlantis.

Tim: That's right. So the third plague is Moses is told to just hit the dust of the land, and the dust of the land will become gnats.

Jon: This is the third plague now?

Tim: This is the third plague. Yeah. "Strike the dust of the ground and they'll just become annoying little gnats. And the gnats are going to go all throughout the land and just be on people." (00:34:00) But you know, if you've ever been—

Jon: Am I supposed to be thinking of like a small insect?

Tim: Not even as big as flies. Like gnats. Man, I just know this in the summer, I ride my bike, I’m a bike commuter here in Portland. So I ride my bike everywhere. And in the summer, especially mid to late summer, often, I'll be riding home from work and I'll see what looks like a little gray patch of mist in front of me.

Jon: Yeah, just little bugs.

Tim: ... And it's a little cloud of gnats.

Jon: Oh, those are gnats.

Tim: And when I ride into them, they get in my nose and my mouth. And all of a sudden I've got like three gnats in my mouth and two on my nose.

Jon: That's a type of gnat. Gnats could be all sorts of things.

Tim: Oh, I'm sure.

Jon: It may include flies and mosquitoes.

Tim: Oh, interesting.

Jon: Well, I mean, according to kidshealth.org. (00:35:00)

Tim: Is that what came up when you Google “gnats”?

Jon: I Googled "do gnats bite?"

Tim: Okay, got it. But the point is they're just really tiny flying insects. That's Wikipedia. And gnat is one of many species of tiny flying insects.

Jon: Okay. Some sort of tiny flying insect.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Now, is it significant that it came from the dust?

Tim: Of course, it is. Yes, it is. So he strikes the dust of the land. And what we're told is that the dust of the land becomes gnats on the humans.

Jon: And humans were made from the dust of the land.

Tim: Exactly. It's exactly the language used. Humans from the dust of the land.

Jon: So there's a bit of a ... not a reversal but kind of a twist in the idea that God created you from the dust. Now he's covering you with something annoying from the dust.

Tim: Yeah. The dust is the main biblical motif for mortality. Returning to the dust. (00:36:00) Here the dust is a—

Jon: The death is coming out of the ground and covering you. Whoa.

Tim: Yeah. It's kind of gross. It's almost zombie-like but not like humanoid zombie. It's kind of like the slime. Man, you know what? I remember the first sci-fi horror movie I ever saw. I was at my grandma's house. I must have been young, six or seven. It was just called "The Green Slime." I think it was just called "The Green Slime." Yeah, 1968, “The Green Slime.” Dude, that movie filled my imagination for a disproportionate amount of years, like well into my tween years I was thinking about "The Green Slime."

Jon: Wow.

Tim: It was a sci-fi thriller. "A group of scientists unknowingly bring back a strange green substance that threatens to take over the planet.”

Jon: This is the kind of movie Mystery Science Theater watches and it makes fun of. (00:37:00)

Tim: It is. That's exactly what it is. I really should watch it. I bet it would redeem the—“a giant asteroid heading to Earth, astronauts disembark to blow it up. They're successful, but they bring the green substance—"

Jon: It's rated G.

Tim: Anyhow, why am I thinking about this? Oh, yeah, the gnats. The gnats are like the green slime. They're the dust of the earth coming alive and then trying to cover you and drag you back into it. There we go. That's it.

Next, plague number four is the flies. And what we're told about the flies is they will come up out of the ground and they will fill the land.

Jon: So the idea of blessing in Genesis 1 is about filling and multiplying. But flies to fill and multiply is kind of the opposite of life. Flies like to decompose things.

Tim: Yeah, totally.

Jon: That's their job.

Tim: Yeah. They hang out on decomposing things. Mostly manure piles and carcasses.

Jon: Lovely. (00:38:00)

Tim: And they fill the land.

Jon: With death.

Tim: Yeah. So this mirrors the "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land," which is about life. And what you're saying is flies are often hanging around death and they're filling land. The other thing that happens with the plague of the flies is God makes a distinction. This the first one we got to makes a separation. So God separated between my people and your people. So there will be no swarming flies in the land of Goshen where Israel is hanging out, but there will be many flies. So there's this separation of Israel and Egypt. That's plague number four.

Plague number five is an actual plague like a disease that comes on the livestock of the land. So in the plague on the livestock ... Oh, yeah, this is interesting. So in the plagues on the livestock, God says he's going to (00:39:00) make a distinction between the herds of Israel and between the herds of Egypt and he will set an appointed time. Yeah, an appointed time for this to happen.

Jon: Is this *moed*?

Tim: This is the word “*moed*.” This is echoing when God's separated between light and dark on day one. But then he handed over the responsibility of separating to the lights, and that they become signs of the appointed times and that they separate. So at least that this one, for example, I don't think the parallel is between Egypt and Israel and the lights above. This is the language of creation of God separating and appointing times. But here it's to bring death instead of life on Egypt. Plague number five.

Plague number six is about the boils. Here Moses is to go to an oven and get a whole bunch of soot, like sooty dust, and then throw it up (00:40:00) into the skies. And then the wind will carry it all around. And as it lands on people's skin it will erupt into boils and lesions.

Jon: He's really creative now.

Tim: Totally. I think one of the key things here is the word ... The boils are on human and beast. The word "boil" is the Hebrew word “snake” backwards. And that wouldn't have struck me as significant until a few years ago I realized that ...

Jon: That happens all over the place.

Tim: ... wordplay is spelling words backwards and forwards and scrambling letters just like a main literary technique of the biblical authors.

Jon: So what's the word?

Tim: “*Shechin*.”

Jon: *Shechin* instead of *nephesh*.

Tim: Instead of *nakhash*.

Jon: Oh, *nakhash*.

Tim: *Nakhash*, *shechin*. It's an anagram. Backwards and forwards. The seventh plague is the hailstones. This is a long one.

Jon: You said the third of each set is a long ... (00:41:00) Wait, the seventh isn't the third then.

Tim: It's the beginning of the third triad.

Jon: It's the beginning of the third triad.

Tim: That's right. Plagues one, four, and seven each began a triad. So seven, eight, nine. So you get the phrase, "I'm going to send another strike so that you will know ..." It's a variation on our theme phrase, which is typically "Y'all will know that I am Yahweh." The hail plague begins with saying, "So that you will know that there is no one like me in all the land." So we're ramping things up here.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So the hail is about sending stones from the sky. Oh, dude, I was driving home from Mount Hood yesterday, which is about an hour and a half east of Portland, and it was the most intense hail storm I've ever driven through. Right around Sandy, Oregon.

Jon: Oh, it was huge.

Tim: Yeah. As big as I've ever seen in Oregon. I've seen bigger in Wisconsin like ... (00:42:00)

Jon: You hear stories of—

Tim: ... dime size that put dents in cars.

Jon: But your story is like softball-sized hail.

Tim: Yeah, it can get even more intense. But this was more like BB pellet.

Jon: While you're driving through it it's even more intense.

Tim: But it was just the amount and intensity of it. It was so loud. I was with my family in the car and we couldn't hear each other talk to each other. We had to yell. Anyway, it was pretty exciting. So, hail. But man, if you don't have a framework for what that is, just the fact that sometimes clouds will come and they look like they're going to drop rain, but instead they drop ice rocks. That's terrifying.

Jon: It's like shooting ice rocks.

Tim: Terrifying stuff, man.

Jon: Is there a connection to de-creation?

Tim: What the hailstones do is they come upon human and beast and all the vegetation of the field. So it hits all of the things that the land brings forth for blessing in life in Genesis 1 on days three and six, which is let (00:43:00) plants of the field come up, let creatures come up out of the ground, and then God makes humans from the dust of the ground. And these are the things that are struck in the hail.

Jon: All the land blessing.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Land blessing is reversed. Leading to the eighth plague: locusts. The locusts are going to come and they're going to eat everything that sprouts up out of the ground from day three in Genesis. They're going to eat every tree that sprouts from the field, every green thing in the field, and all of the fruit and vegetation of the trees. It's just all the vocabulary of day three of Genesis. And they're going to fill your houses.

Jon: They're going to multiply and fill.

Tim: God brings a wind over the desert to blow them in.

Jon: A *ruakh*?

Tim: Yeah. So just like God's *ruakh* was there in the darkness bringing order, here, God's *ruakh,* as it were, brings in these (00:44:00) creatures that will decimate the land and bring disorder. Leading to the ninth plague, the climax of the triads. This is great. What God says to Moses is "Let there be darkness." That's exactly the inversion of day one.

Jon: Day one: let there be light. Let there be darkness.

Tim: Let there be darkness. But for the sons of Israel, there was light in their dwellings, but the darkness was intense over the land of Egypt for three days. So every one of these is both a demonstration of Yahweh's power as author of creation. "So that you will know that I am Yahweh" that repeats seven times throughout this. So the first nine are really a coherent, tight section that are all inverting and alluding to the creation stories. But it's the de-creation story in every level.

**Section break (00:44:57)**

Tim: So this leads to the last and climactic, which is kind of this set apart 10th and final one mirroring the 10 words that God speaks in Genesis 1.

Jon: Oh, 10 times in Genesis 1 ...

Tim: God speaks.

Jon: ... God speaks a word.

Tim: There's seven days ...

Jon: 10 words.

Tim: ... but 10 times God speak in Genesis 1. Here there's 10 words that God speaks of striking Egypt.

Jon: Of judgment.

Tim: So there's an announcement that God's going to strike the firstborn of Egypt, and all the firstborn of Egypt, human and beast, will die. (00:46:00) However. So this echoes again back to Pharaoh's death of the sons of Israel back at the beginning. In fact, back in chapter 4, God even said, "You're killing my firstborn son, Israel. Be careful how you respond because I'll do the same to you." That was a warning.

Jon: Before the plagues even started there was warning.

Tim: Back in Exodus 4. So now God says, "That's what I'm going to bring." Pharaoh is still stubborn. He still won't let the people go. So he's going to invert Pharaoh's evil back on himself, and the firstborn among human and beasts will die.

So what God provides here, however, in the plague on the firstborn is something that contrasts Pharaoh back in chapter 1. Pharaoh had no mercy. He's just throwing baby boys into the water. Here, God says, "Hey, I'm going to turn your evil back on your own head. But for anybody, Israelite or Egyptian who fears the word of the Lord, (00:47:00) here is a means of escape. Your house can become an ark of refuge."

So there's this big emphasis, this is Passover, and this emphasis on going into the house. The word “house” in Hebrew, “*habayit*,” or actually the phrase "into the house," “*habayita”* is the word for Noah's ark spelled backwards. *Tebah habayita*. It's great. So the house becomes a little ark where humans and animals go in together and they seek refuge and safety in the house.

Jon: From the flood.

Tim: And then it also merges together with the themes of Noah's sacrifice. When God saw Noah's sacrifice and said, "I'll never again bring the strike,” that is the flood here, Yahweh says, "If you go into the house," which is an inverted ark, "and offer one blameless, young lamb and mark it's blood on the doorposts ..." Notice the inclusio (00:48:00) frame of the first plague, the blood of the Nile, and then the 10th plague.

Jon: The blood of the innocent.

Tim: Blood of the lamb on the door. And then Yahweh will see the blood and he won't allow the destroyer to come strike the firstborn. There's this interesting interplay where Yahweh says, "I'm going to pass through the land and I will strike the firstborn of Egypt on this night.”

Jon: But then it's not him.

Tim: But then when the narrator actually comes, it says Yahweh ... There's another time that Yahweh describes it and he says, "I won't allow the destroyer to come.” And there's a long, ancient debate on who or what the destroyer is.

Jon: Interesting.

Tim: But I think the bigger point for our discussion is this phrase "You will know that I'm Yahweh" gets repeated again in this last plague.

Jon: So they go into the safe place, the little mini Eden, humans and animals together, a refuge, it's marked by (00:49:00) a sacrifice, which is kind of similar to when Noah gets out of the refuge ...

Tim: Exactly.

Jon: ... he marks it with a sacrifice.

Tim: Yes, that's right.

Jon: They put it on the door. It's blood on the door. And the blood of the innocent was calling out—

Tim: From the river.

Jon: From the river. This is the blood representing the blood of the innocent or just representing life?

Tim: But it's blood of a substitute that Yahweh has provided.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: This is all developing the themes of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, where Abraham's sins caught up with him wronging Hagar the Egyptian immigrant. So Yahweh demanded the life of Abraham's firstborn through Sarah back, only to give his firstborn son back to him but provide a substitute.

Jon: Which was the ram in the thicket.

Tim: Which was the ram in the thicket. So here, Yahweh is demanding the life of the firstborn, both of Egypt and of Israel. But he provides for anybody who will go into an ark, a house ... (00:50:00)

Jon: He provides a substitute.

Tim: ... and take the substitute that Yahweh has provided, there will be life instead of death.

Jon: So there's this pattern of the substitute that’s developing—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: That's provided by Yahweh.

Tim: So it's not a sacrifice of atonement the way that Israel's later sacrifices will be in the tabernacle. We're not quite there yet, but it is a substitutionary sacrifice.

Jon: You're saying it's not explicitly that sacrifice of atonement that will be explained later?

Tim: Exactly.

Jon: But it is very similar.

Tim: Totally. Oh, yeah, it's a part of the pattern.

Jon: It's part of the pattern.

Tim: Pattern. So later when Jesus tries to explain his death to his closest followers, he does it on the night of Passover but talks about his death as a sacrifice that will bring ransom or atonement or covering for people's sins. In Jesus' mind, Passover and the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement are blended together thematically.

Jon: And then (00:51:00) the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Tim: Exactly.

Jon: That whole thing.

Tim: All that. John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away sin. But Passover is about ransom from death. It's about all the land is being given over to death. But Yahweh will make a distinction and preserve a chosen remnant out of the de-creation. And how does he do that? He provides a refuge and he provides a substitute.

Jon: And why mark the door with the blood?

Tim: I think it has to do with this theme of the door of Eden.

Jon: Yeah, sin is crouching at the door.

Tim: Yeah. Back in the Cain story ...

Jon: Destroyer is crouching at the door.

Tim: ... you learn there's a door to Eden that they're offering sacrifices at. Cain and Abel are.

Jon: Oh, yeah.

Tim: And then later, Noah gets out of the door of the ark and then builds his altar and offers a sacrifice. And then the door of the tabernacle, the door of the temple were right where the altar was—in front of the door. (00:52:00) So here it's the sacrifice is made inside the house and then marked on the door. It's the boundary between death and life. Inside the house is life marked with a boundary of blood—

Jon: So when Jesus says like, "Knock and the door will be opened," is he riffing off of this boundary idea?

Tim: Ah, that's good. I need to think about that. I'm thinking more this is key temple symbolism of the transition into the temple is going into the place of life. But for people who live in a world of death and human evil, we need to offer a substitute life that is blameless and without blemish, which is what the Passover lamb is. And then that can be a blameless representative before God—

Jon: That opens the way through the door.

Tim: That opens the way back into life when outside there's death. So outside the house is like outside of Eden, where there's the dust of death. But inside the house, because of the substitute, there's life. (00:53:00) That's Passover. So with this plague, I guess we're now transitioning into the Eden story images. If the first nine plagues were about ...

Jon: Creation images.

Tim: ... creation and de-creation from the seven-day creation story in Genesis, the Passover story is filled with Eden imagery of being in or out of the garden and temple imagery. So the Exodus narrative takes a long pause. Chapters 12 and 13 of Exodus are just a long handbook, a ritual handbook for how to celebrate Passover.

Jon: This thing that they did on this day was to be done every year.

Tim: Yeah. The narrative tells you how to reenact the story. It's as if the narrative comes to a culmination by addressing future generations of readers saying, "Hey, readers. I just told you the story. Now, here's what every one of you has to do every year to (00:54:00) reenact this." Because this is not just a story about the past. This is a story of God’s patterns of how he works in the present and will work in the future. So the past deliverance of the exodus becomes through the yearly repetition of it in Passover ritual pointer to future redemption, which is surely why Jesus chose this night and Passover weekend to time ...

Jon: His showdown.

Tim: ... his showdown with the powers in Jerusalem.

Jon: So you get two chapters of instructions of how you're going to do this with your family. Once a year.

Tim: And so it culminates in Passover night becoming the first of a seven-day celebration.

Jon: Passover is a seven-day celebration.

Tim: Passover kicks off a seven-day celebration that's the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So you don't eat unleavened bread—

Jon: And this is the beginning of the Jewish New Year, right?

Tim: Yes. Exodus 12 begins by saying, (00:55:00) "This is the first day of the first month of the first year."

Jon: Yeah. This is new creation.

Tim: Their liberation—they go through the danger of death out into a new set of seven days. And on the first day, they don't do any work. On the seventh day, they don't do any work. And they rest in between eating unleavened bread. It's like the rebirth, the re-creation of Israel out the other side. And all of this is a demonstration of the name and the character, the reputation of Yahweh among the nations. What a remarkable story. We could have spent a lot more time—

Jon: Yeah, we could probably spend a whole hour just talking about the Passover and stuff.

Tim: What we didn't even talk about was the Egyptian's symbolism between the 10 plagues.

Jon: Oh.

Tim: Like how these would have resonated for Egyptians.

Jon: Like how we're showing down with the gods of Egypt.

Tim: Yeah, totally. Actually, for that, I'll just quick recommend a great commentary. One of my go-to (00:56:00) commentaries on Exodus is by Douglas Stuart. It's the Exodus commentary in The New American Commentary series. But he does a great job of talking about and exploring the Egyptian symbolism of frogs and flies and gnats and so on.

I think those things are there in the text too and likely intended. But for readers and meditators on the Hebrew Bible, I think the creation/de-creation imagery is what's mainly in the foreground, which is why we've focused on it here. So this brings to a conclusion the first movement of Exodus.

Jon: And in this movement, we traced the theme of the name, knowing the name. We learn the name Yahweh, and we see God say, "This is the kind of person I am. (00:57:00) I will rescue the oppressed and I'm doing something with this people Israel. And Israel will know my name and the nations will know my name." And these 10 plagues are a showdown of the powers. Yahweh and his power versus the king of Egypt and his gods and their powers.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: By whose name are you going to live? And quite a showdown it is.

Tim: In fact, if you're going to have one little summary takeaway, here's a good life verse from the Exodus story. I don't know why—I remember it because it's Exodus 12:12. "On that night I will pass through Egypt and strike every firstborn among human and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am Yahweh." This is a severe portrait of Yahweh's justice (00:58:00) against an evil tyrant, against dark spiritual powers that entice humans to murder and slaughter each other in the name of political religion. That's what the story is about.

And the very meaning of Yahweh's name is that he is opposed to such wanton violence and disregard for human life. So the name of Yahweh here means justice and liberation for the oppressed. And the story has been sitting here for thousands of years defining the name of Yahweh. And it's challenging readers across time and cultures ever since.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of BibleProject podcast. Next week we begin the second movement of Exodus, looking at the stories of Israel going through the waters, through the wilderness, and up to the mountain. All of these stories (00:59:00) will be tracing the theme of the test.

Tim: I know the word "test" doesn't activate positive associations for a lot of people. But that is a word introduced in the biblical story for how God relates to his chosen ones.

Jon: Today's podcast was produced by Cooper Peltz and edited by Dan Gummel and Zach McKinley. The show notes are by Lindsey Ponder. BibleProject is a nonprofit organization. We exist to experience the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. Everything that we make is free because of the generous support of thousands of people just like you. So thank you so much for being a part of this with us.