

Exodus Session 5 – ‘A plague on you!’

Introduction – how the story came to be compiled

Before you read the Bible chapters (it’s a long passage), be aware that scholars believe that this story has been amalgamated from two sources: ‘J’ and ‘P’, each has a different slant, and they include different plagues, a different rationale and different theology. If you want to read about this in detail, there is a good account here [exodus-3-plagues-1_0.pdf](https://exodus-3-plagues-1.0.pdf) (yale.edu).

Likewise, bear in mind that the events happened approximately in the 13th century BCE, the book of Exodus is believed to have been written in the 6th century BCE, with revisions in the 5th century BCE.

A summary of some of the differences between the sources

Source J	Source P
Blood, frogs, insects, pestilence, hail, locusts.	Staff turning into a serpent (actually, probably a crocodile), blood, frogs, lice, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness
Only the Nile waters turn to blood.	All water in Egypt turns to blood.
Only Moses performs the miracles.	Aaron performs the miracles on Moses’ instructions
Confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh	Neither Moses nor Aaron nor Pharaoh speaks. Only God speaks – to instruct Moses and Aaron.
Moses announces the plagues.	No warning is given.
Pharaoh responds stubbornly.	Pharaoh has no chance to respond.
The plagues are there to persuade Pharaoh to change his mind.	The plagues are to punish Pharaoh.
There is a time interval between the plagues, giving Pharaoh an opportunity to relent.	All the plagues happen in one session (except the plague of darkness).

In our session we shall be considering some of the challenging questions raised by the account and the emphasis from each source.

You can read the story of the ten plagues in the NIV here [Exodus 7:14-11:10 NIV - The Plague of Blood - Then the LORD - Bible Gateway](#) or in the NRSV here [Exodus 7:14-11:10 NRSVA - The First Plague: Water Turned to Blood - Bible Gateway](#) or in your own version (Exodus 7:14 – 11:10)

Questions to ponder that we shall discuss

Some have proposed that the plagues can be explained by a sequence of natural events triggered by either a volcanic eruption or a bloom of red algae. How would you respond to that?

Challenges raised by source P

Is it fair that Pharaoh and the Egyptians had no warning and no opportunity to change their mind?

Who suffered most from the plagues?

What was achieved by this?

Challenges raised by source J

According to this source, what was the purpose of the plagues?

Was it effective in convincing Pharaoh to change his mindset?

How do you regard Moses' asking Pharaoh to let the Israelites go away to worship, when his intention was to escape permanently from Egypt? Was his dishonesty justified?

Other questions

How do you reconcile the idea of a loving God with the suffering brought on by these plagues?

How do you feel about the final plague in particular – the death of the first-born?

'Punishment or persuasion' – 'judgement or education' – how do you regard the story of the ten plagues?

If punishment (judgement) – what was this for? The suffering of the Israelites, the failure to permit them to worship, or the denial of the God of the Israelites as being supreme?

What do you think the compilers of Exodus hoped to teach in the final ('canonical') version we read in the Bible?

What else do we learn from the story of the Ten Plagues?

What would we lose if the story of the Ten Plagues was missing from the Bible?