Not Fact, Yet True
Historicity versus Theology in the ‘Plague Narrative’ (Ex 7-11)

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ABSTRACT

In modern society, which is strongly oriented towards technical and scientific knowledge, biblical narratives often look very strange. People who perceive everything as explicable no longer understand the biblical wonder. This is the context of the search for naturalistic explanations and historical settings with respect to often unusual biblical narratives. Against this background, the present contribution examines how the so-called (un)historical character of the ‘Plague Narrative’ is approached. The first part describes three examples of whether and how exegetes situate the plagues in a natural, Egyptian environmental context. The second part discusses the approach to the historicity of the plagues. Again, three main opinions are illuminated. Within this context, there is a remarkable evolution from the historical to the theological in the way the question is addressed. Therefore, the third part presents the theological meaning and function of the ‘Plague Narrative’ from different points of view. In addition to the positive implications of this narrative, this part focuses on the fundamental theological question of divine violence.

A INTRODUCTION

To modern society, which is strongly oriented towards technical and natural-scientific investigation of reality, the biblical narratives often appear strange. For a mentality which considers things to be reproducible and explicable, the biblical ‘wonder’ or divine ‘sign’ seems to be excluded. One does not recognise the inexpressible that is echoed in human words. If the biblical narratives are to be met with any response, the events and phenomena described therein must be interpreted rationally.

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In this context, the question as to the historical character of the biblical events is also asked. Explanations and historical backgrounds are sought for the sometimes very bizarre tales. The familiar story of the plagues preceding the exodus from Egypt (Ex 7:14–11:10) has particularly raised these specific questions. Moreover, this problem has sometimes strongly influenced and oriented scholars in their exegetical research into the ‘plagues narrative’: on occasion, the danger of strict historicism does not seem far away. There is a real threat that the attention to the literary value of the narrative would then be weakened.

This contribution will ascertain if and in which way the (un)historical character of the plagues is the focus of biblical exegetical research. First, it is shown how the researchers situate the plagues in a natural context within the Egyptian environment. Subsequently, the approach of the history of the events of the plagues themselves is indicated. The way in which scholars have treated this question appears to have undergone a remarkable evolution from historical to theological interest. Finally, against the background of this conclusion, the theological meaning and function of the ‘Plague Narrative’ as they appear in the exegetical research will be discussed.

**B THE NATURAL BACKGROUND AND THE EGYPTIAN ENVIRONMENT**

Generally, amongst exegetes who seek a natural background to the ‘Plague Narrative’, one encounters three different positions. To provide the ‘Plague Narrative’ with a more or less historical basis, some posit a detailed natural explanation of the narrative and confirm on these grounds that it contains a historical core. They claim it should be possible to trace each of the plagues back to a natural phenomenon in the Egyptian environment. In other words, they indicate the events in their ecological context and attempt to connect them causally. Other researchers voice criticisms of this explanation and are of the opinion that the Egyptian environment only influenced the description of the plagues: the authors did find inspiration in their natural surroundings for the literal description, but the narrative itself is primarily directed towards the proclamation of a theological core content. Finally, various biblical scholars radically reject these two attempts at explanation and posit that the ‘Plague Narrative’ intends to offer a theological message and does not contain any historical accounts.

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2 Ex 7:14-11:10 contains the account of ten plagues that YHWH brought over Egypt to force Pharaoh to let Israel leave. This composition is often divided as follows (see a.o. Houtman 1989:13-21): I: Water turned into blood (7:14-25); II: Frogs (7:26-8:11); III: Lice (8:12-15); IV: Insects (8:16-28); V: Cattle pestilence (9:1-7); VI: Infections (9:8-12); VII: Hail, thunder, fire and rain (9:13-35); VIII: Locusts (10:1-20); IX: Darkness (10:21-29); X: Announcement of the death of the firstborn (11:1-10).

3 Compare also Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2006:37-42).

4 Cf. in this regard also Lemmelijn (1996a).
1 An explicitly natural explanation with a historical core

Ever since its emergence, modern biblical criticism has related the events of the ‘Plague Narrative’, which are at first glance so strange, to various natural phenomena occurring in the Egyptian environment. They are of the opinion that the Israelites saw the work of YHWH in an impressive natural event. The study of the ‘Plague Narrative’ would indicate how God worked powerfully through a series of natural phenomena and would simultaneously clarify how Israel interpreted all this religiously as being help from YHWH (McNeile 1908:43).

Which natural phenomena lie at the foundation of the plagues in Ex 7-11, is understood in different ways.

The Egyptian ecosystem. – Many scholars attempt to explain the events of Ex 7-11 against the background of various natural phenomena within the Egyptian ecosystem. In scholarly studies on the ‘Plague Narrative’, one encounters the following explanation.5 The first plague, which relates how the water turns to blood (Ex 7:14-25), is explained by the fact that in the period of the rising Nile, around June, many particles of red earth were carried along from the mountains of Abyssinia and from Ethiopia. Besides this, an appeal is made to a particular kind of algae and micro-organisms which turn the water red. The second plague, the emergence of a huge quantity of frogs (Ex 7:26-8:11), is to be attributed to flooding. Annually, when the Nile floods, numerous frogs that live in the water are brought onto the land. The Nile’s living water was an excellent environment for frogs, which happened to spread regularly, causing plagues. In Palestine, on the other hand, there were almost no frogs. The innumerable insects of the third and fourth plagues (Ex 8:12-28), whose larvae also developed in the silt of the Nile, eagerly settled around the frog carcasses. The latter are the cause of a pestilence epidemic in the fifth and sixth plagues (Ex 9:1-12), of which the bacterial spread was stimulated by the buzzing swarms of insects. Furthermore, in connection with the sixth plague (Ex 9:8-12), it is indicated that a great many skin diseases were widespread in Egypt. Supposedly there is even a disease called ‘Egyptian sores’ (cf. Deut 28:27), which makes one think

of skin diseases such as variola and Nile spots. The seventh plague brought hail and storms (Ex 9:13-35), a relatively rare phenomenon in Egypt. These thunderstorms destroyed a large part of the harvest, causing famine. The atmospheric conditions that would have caused a hailstorm could also cause other plagues. In this way, the locusts of the eighth plague (Ex 10:1-20) were supposedly carried on the wind. Locusts were a familiar and feared threat. For the darkness of the ninth plague (Ex 10:21-29), scholars have often posited the occurrence of a hot desert wind, which would darken everything due to the enormous dust clouds it carries. They point to the so-called ‘khamsin’, which not infrequently rages for days and leaves the land in chaos. For the tenth plague, the death of the first-born that was announced in Ex 11:1-10, various kinds of pestilence or deadly polio are sometimes indicated, but scholars usually add that every thought of a ‘natural event’ has disappeared in this narrative. The disaster should be understood as revenge for pharaoh’s attempt to murder the first-born of the Israelites.

Furthermore, in the search for a natural background to the phenomena recounted in the ‘Plague Narrative’, an attempt was made to connect the plagues to one another causally. One plague must, as it were, immediately follow the former on the grounds of natural consequences and effects. One author in particular, G. Hort, has explained all the plagues causally, against the background of the Egyptian ecosystem. Natural phenomena occurring in rapid succession over the course of one year form the framework for her explanation. Hort’s theory is based on the hypothesis of unusually heavy rainfall on the East-African plateau, the highlands of Ethiopia and the Southern parts of the Nile valley. This would indeed have caused a series of catastrophes.

Hort relates the first plague to the numerous particles of red earth in the water of the Nile. The death of the fish would be due to the numerous bacteria carried along by the current. According to Hort, the frogs of the second plague would normally only have moved onto the land in September or October, but as an exception, due to the abnormal pollution of the Nile because of the dead fish, they overran the land during the period of the flooding. The third plague, which brought mosquitoes, and the fourth plague of the flies – the ‘stomoxys calcitrans’ in Hort’s opinion – are not rare in the Egyptian environment, but the unusual situation caused much more intense swarms. She explains the fifth plague, namely the pestilence that only struck the cattle of the Egyptians, as

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6 Cf., with respect to the redactional character of Ex 11:1-10, also Lemmelijn (1996b:443-460).
7 Compare also to Ex 4:22-23.
follows: with the withdrawal of the water, the Egyptian cattle were already grazing in the open fields and they were thus struck by the ‘bacillus anthracis’, whereas the cattle of the Israelites, located in the Delta region, could not yet enter the open fields and as a result were not affected. The swarms of the sixth plague were caused by ‘anthrax’, which had been caused by the ‘stomoxys calcitrans’ of the fourth plague. Hort also has an explanation for the hailstorms of the seventh plague. According to her, the key to this lies in Ex 9:31-32, from which the time period of the occurrence of the plague can be deduced. According to her, hailstorms occur occasionally in Upper Egypt, but they are not season-dependent. In the north, an area with a Mediterranean climate, they only occur in late spring or early autumn. Consequently, Goshen, the area in which Israel resided, would not suffer such storms between November and March. In addition, the ripening of the crops mentioned in verses 31 and 32 was delayed, which may explain, according to Hort, why the wheat and spelt were not yet developed enough to be destroyed. The eighth plague of the locusts would be a fairly common occurrence. After their hibernation, the locusts usually move to Palestine or Egypt between February and March, depending on the direction of the wind. This invasion thus took place between March and the beginning of May. In Hort’s opinion, the ninth plague, which brought darkness over Egypt, was caused by the ‘khamsin’, the wind that not infrequently lasts two or three days and which was especially intense this year as a consequence of the increasingly destructive effects of the successive plagues. She explains that the Israelites were spared this by the fact that they lived in Goshen, located in the Wadi Tumilat, an area that would have suffered little damage from a ‘khamsin’ from the south.

Against the background of the natural explanations mentioned, several exegetes have also attempted to find a chronology in the plagues. It is often accepted that the whole drama would have played out between June, the period of the Nile floods and April, the time of the Pesach feast. The course of events is then seen in the following way. In June the banks of the Nile flooded, the water level dropped and the water became very turbid. Because of this flood, the frogs went onto the land in July. Over the course of the summer and autumn, the torment of the mosquitoes, the rashes and the other diseases were suffered. The hailstorm is then situated in January, followed by the locusts in February. March was the month in which the sandstorms raged. Finally, the last plague and the exodus are situated around April.

A volcanic eruption on the island of Santorini (Thera). – In addition to the explanations which relate the plagues to the Egyptian ecosystem itself, a number of scholars posit another ‘natural’ explanation for the events of Ex 7-11. Namely, they refer to a volcanic eruption on the island of Santorini (Thera) in

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9 Cf. e.g. Heinisch (1934:78) and Böhl (1928:114).
around 1500 BC.\footnote{Compare also I. Velikovsky (1950:60-61, 63, 66, 69-71, 73-76). Velikovsky offers a similar explanation, but he starts with a different basic fact: it was not the volcanic eruption on Santorini, but the touching of a new comet with earth in the middle of the second millennium BC, which caused the Egyptian plagues. The orbit of this comet would have brought it close to the earth, which its gaseous tail touched. According to Velikovsky, this fact explains why other sources from the ancient world witnessed and narrated similar phenomena.} This eruption, which is considered the worst to take place in the last four millennia, caused a great many unusual natural phenomena in the area surrounding the island. The Egyptian Nile delta, where the plagues of Ex 7-11 are situated, is located approximately one thousand kilometres to the south-east of Santorini. For this reason, these scholars posit that there is a relation between the plagues and the side-effects of this volcanic eruption, at least when Moses is dated in the second half of the second millennium BC.

The natural explanation presented on the grounds of this event, can be summarised as follows.\footnote{Cf. also Block (1976:525)} Between 1500 and 1200 BC, an unusually severe volcanic eruption on Santorini sent an enormous amount of rubble, ash, vapour, bacteria and shock waves into the atmosphere. The volcanic grit, broken off by the heat, was carried approximately one thousand kilometres by a south-easterly wind and descended in Egypt. Moses interpreted these inexplicable natural phenomena as the ‘will of God’ and subsequently approached Pharaoh with the request to let the Israelites leave. The pink-red ash, originating in the red layers of stone of Santorini, fell in the Nile, making the people think the water had turned into blood (plague I). The subterranean water, which was not affected by the ash, remained drinkable as a result (cf. Ex 7:24). The alkaline ash subsequently contaminated the water, as a result of which the frogs were forced to leave their natural habitat and seek refuge on the land (plague II). The infected frogs died and their carcasses attracted mosquitoes and flies (plagues III and IV). These insects and the germs present because of the unhygienic circumstances described, brought pestilence to the animals (plague V) and sores for the people (plague VI). Increased amounts of vapour and ash in the atmosphere were the cause of serious thunderstorms, rain and hail (plague VII). The storm winds from the northwest subsequently made the locusts migrate.\footnote{See Block (1976:522, 525): in Egypt the prevailing winds blow from the north or northwest.} From their usual nesting place at the Red Sea they would have smelt the fresh greenery, thriving in Egypt after the heavy rains with the aid of their very strongly developed sense of smell. An enormous swarm of locusts would then have invaded Egypt (plague VIII). Various possible causes for the darkness (plague IX) could be indicated. Firstly, the sun may have been eclipsed by the enormous amount of ash blown over by the volcanic eruption. In addition, it is possible that the winds caused by the volcanic eruption led to the above-mentioned...
phenomenon of the ‘khamsin’ wind. Furthermore, the darkness may also have been caused by the especially large swarm of locusts. Finally, the death of the first-born (plague X) can be traced back to the fact that the enormous amount of ash, carried over by the volcanic storm winds, caused the roofs of the Egyptian houses to collapse, causing the deaths of a great many Egyptians, including the first-born. The Israelite houses on the other hand, would have been built of lighter material, so that their collapse was less life-threatening (Block 1976:523 and Velikovsky 1950:73). On the basis of this information, some consider it very plausible that the ten plagues of Egypt were the result of the catastrophic volcanic eruption on Santorini in the middle of the second millennium BC.

2 A natural-literary description with a theological core

Besides the defenders of the natural explanations, there are also scholars who are no advocates of natural and/or historical succession hypotheses, but who nevertheless are convinced that the description of the plagues draws on knowledge of the Egyptian environment. In other words, they rather consider the natural background as a source of inspiration for the literary description.¹⁴ It is often posited that the authors of the ‘Plague Narrative’ chose familiar natural phenomena from the Egyptian environment, but went beyond the natural character of these phenomena to such an extent that they took on the meaning of divine miracle signs. In this way, it is emphasised that the core of the ‘Plague Narrative’ is not natural or historical, but theological.¹⁵ These authors thus agree that a natural background lies at the root of the literary description of the plagues, but prefer to focus their attention on the theological meaning of the narrative.¹⁶ In this context, it is first stated that the plagues are by no means only supernatural interventions, considering that their description is founded upon natural phenomena which still occur in the Near East nowadays. If one interprets this natural background as a successive series of events, however, one runs the risk of radically rationalising the narrative and forgetting the real meaning of the biblical tradition. The concern therein is the miracles performed by YHWH to execute his salvation plan for the chosen people. In this context the historical facts are less important than the meaning that they acquire in the history of Israel as the people of God.

In opposition to the option to emphasise the natural background of the Egyptian environment for the plagues, C. Houtman posits that the literary description of the ‘Plague Narrative’ does not betray any specific knowledge of Egypt (Houtman 1989, Part 2,31). In his opinion, one gets the impression that the description of the plagues took the effect on the inhabitants of Palestine into

¹⁴ Compare a.o. Gunkel et al. (1921, 1/1:50); Noth (1959:56); Fohrer (1964:75-79); Burns (1983:74, 76, 78, 87).
particular consideration. G. Fohrer, who nevertheless contends that knowledge of the Egyptian environment influenced the description of the plagues, admits that a number of the phenomena described do indeed seem more familiar in Palestine than in Egypt (Fohrer 1964:78). For example, according to him, the cattle pestilence of the fifth plague is not a typical phenomenon in Egypt. The hail of the seventh plague appears to be extremely rare by Egyptian measures; in his view, its description should sooner be associated with the climatological conditions of Palestine. Moreover, A. H. McNeile argues that locust swarms certainly did not spare Egypt, but were more frequent in the region of Syria. (McNeile 1908:45). H. Gunkel furthermore indicates that the direction of the wind that brought and removed the locusts is described from the geographical location of Palestine (Gunkel 1921, 1/1:50).

3 A Literary-theological narrative, no historical report

Critiques are voiced from various sides against the natural explanations, which some authors adhere to as though they guaranteed the coveted historical evidence and truth of the narrated events. Attention to the value of the literary composition and development history of the text has led to the formulation of serious objections.

According to this critique, the narratives of the plagues do not only depend on knowledge of the Egyptian environment for their literary results; they also make use of a number of familiar literary motifs (Sarna 1986:69-70). The changing of water into blood is copied by the magicians, which may indicate that it is a professional ‘trick’. For that matter, Egyptian literature contains various stories that describe analogous phenomena. For example, in the story of the Prince Khamwas, the fourth son of Rameses II, it is told that he informs his mother that, should he be defeated, she would have to drink water that would turn the colour of blood. The flies of the fourth plague also seem to reflect a familiar phenomenon; Sarna indicates a similar threat in the ‘Prophecies of Neferti’. Finally, locusts were also a terrible and horrifying plague, which was all too familiar, as is apparent from the descriptions in the book of Joel (1:2-20).

Furthermore, it is indicated that attempts to explain the plagues naturally and/or in part rationally, do not take into sufficient consideration the literary particularity of the ‘Plague Narrative’. One must not forget that ‘the literary composition wants to bring something quite different to the fore, namely God’s

17 However, Fohrer emphasises that the miraculous character of the plagues as an intervention by YHWH is more important than the so-called ‘natural’ aspect of the events (1964:79).
dealings with his people’. The development history and the particular character of the biblical narrative are also misunderstood to a great extent, if one one-sidedly emphasises the so-called exclusive natural background of the narrative. The narrative must under no circumstances be considered a relation of facts. The artistic and narrative character of Ex 7-11 has developed into its current epic form by way of a kind of process of accumulation over a long and complicated development history. Moreover, it must be mentioned in this regard that the aim of the plagues, namely the demonstration of God’s power in the world, can offer an interpretation key to understand the historical background of the narrative cycle (Clements 1972:41). Instead of continuing to seek natural explanations for supernatural events, one must recognise that the authors assembled narratives with great dramatic tendencies, about various natural and unusual events in the life of Egypt.

Furthermore, according to the critique, the natural explanations neglect the so-called ‘hyper-natural’ character of the plagues (Fretheim 1991:385-396, especially 393-394). From this perspective, the emphasis is placed on the fact that the plagues cannot be called natural either in their causes or effects. The literary description of Ex 7-11 demonstrates that YHWH brings about the total reversal of nature. Creation transforms into chaos. This is given expression, for example, in the fact that the hail destroyed all the plants, that the sixth plague causes all the people to suffer from sores and that the ninth plague covers the whole land in darkness. In addition, this ‘hyper-natural’ character of the ‘Plague Narrative’ is also given expression in the description of Goshen and Israel, areas that are totally spared from these all-encompassing plagues. From this, it may be concluded that the attempts to explain the events in the ‘Plague Narrative’ as merely ‘natural’ occurrences, totally lose sight of the point of the text of Ex 7-11.

Other biblical scholars radically dismiss the natural explanations of the plagues. These ‘recurring natural-scientific explanations of the plagues are not very convincing’ (Schmidt 1983:51). Furthermore, these hypotheses misunderstand not only the literary particularity of the narrative and the miraculous nature of the events, but also its theological meaning and content. It is re-

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21 See e.g. Dumermuth (1964:323-325, especially 324); McCarthy (1965:336-347, especially 337); Schmidt (1983:51).
22 E.g. Durham (1987:118) refutes Hort’s natural explanations: ‘This kind of wild speculation is also misleading, and not only because of its absurdity. Worse still is its discrediting of the theological tenor of the biblical narrative, which will admit no naturalistic and hence non-miraculous “explanations”’. 
futed, moreover, that a precise historical reconstruction might be possible. It is emphasised that the ‘Plague Narrative’ was not intended to be an accurate report for future historians (Plastaras 1966:130-133). The biblical authors were not reporters who wanted to render some sort of eye-witness account. They wanted prophetically to transmit a religious interpretation of reality. The intention of the ‘Plague Narrative’ was the proclamation of YHWH’s miraculous deeds and his judgement of Egypt. To that end, the events were recorded in an epic style. Nevertheless, according to scholars, this is not reason enough to negate a priori every form of historicity, though it may no longer be accessed. However, the question of modern readers, what the distinction is between miraculous events and natural phenomena, does not fit against this background. In accordance with the mentality of the biblical authors, the narrative does not intend to answer such questions, but attempts only to be a confirming proclamation of the fact that YHWH liberated Israel. In this context, natural explanations are of little importance. Ex 7-11 is a literary-theological narrative, not a historical report.

C THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the context of the discussion on the natural background of the plagues, questions concerning the historical foundation of the narrated events were raised in research. This issue brought a great many problems to the fore, which were addressed in different ways. Generally speaking, one can also distinguish three approaches in this regard. From the conservative perspective it is posited that the ‘Plague Narrative’, almost to its details, is based on historical facts, dated to the second half of the second millennium BCE. Others are convinced of the opinion that Ex 7-11 probably has a foundation in historical fact, namely the experience of disasters in Egypt, which Israel interpreted as the liberating action of YHWH, but according to this group nothing more can be ascertained. Finally, others believe that the literary character of the ‘plagues cycle’ does not allow any further historical information to be distilled from it. The historical reconstruction of the possible facts behind the ‘Plague Narrative’ is characterised as mere guesswork and attention is exclusively focused on the literary and theological particularity of the narrative. It is emphasised that the natural explanations are rarely binding and what’s more, they historicise to a great extent, sometimes to the absurd.

See e.g. Eakin (1977:473-482, especially 476-477): ‘Since the meaning behind the event was more central than the descriptive details of the event, it is unwise to seek an historical reconstruction of the plagues on the basis of available evidence. … Although these events are rooted in observable history (i.e., they were concrete events, albeit not “verifiable” by historical-critical tools), one must not fall prey to the modernist temptation to reconstruct them with an indubitable specificity. … What is crucial to interpretation is that, through the vehicle of this holistic narrative, the Hebrews have proclaimed that God has acted’.
1 Historical verifiability

A minority of more conservative exegetes posit that with respect to the ‘Plague Narrative’ and a fortiori the tenth plague, which narrates the death of the first-born, a precise historical background is identifiable (see e.g. Gispen 1932:15). In this approach, the occurrence of the plagues is situated during the reign of Amenophis II. Traces of the plagues are not entirely absent from the historical documents. After the fifth year of Amenophis’ reign there are no more monuments, which suggests there was a period of decline and economic recession (Gispen 1932:15). Furthermore, it is indicated that it was not Amenophis’ oldest son Manetho who succeeded him, but instead it was Thutmoses IV who came to power. This was not his first-born, which may be an indication that Manetho died during the tenth plague. It is also in this framework that the events are dated: the plagues would have taken place either between 1580 and 1321 BC, during the 18th dynasty, or between 1321 and 1205, during the 19th dynasty. According to this theory, the month of the tenth plague is mentioned in Ex 13:4 and 23:14 and can be identified as the month Abib, around March or the beginning of April.

2 A historical core

However, a great many scholars reflect upon it differently: the foundation of the ‘Plague Narrative’ in Ex 7-11 is a basic historical fact, which was later reflected upon and reinterpreted theologically. This historical core is described in various ways.

Before the departure of Israel, Egypt was struck by a number of disasters, which were later interpreted as interventions by YHWH (Baentsch 1900:58). However, one does not necessarily have to accept such a historical background as a condition. For once Israel’s faith was certain that YHWH had saved his people from Egypt, the people’s imagination gave form to this truth of faith through lively stories. Furthermore, in this context, it is posited that Moses and Aaron used the historical catastrophes to persuade the Egyptian court of the superiority of YHWH. The events only acquired a miraculous nature afterwards, because of their association with God’s omnipotence in the ‘Plague Narrative’. The real value of Ex 7-11 would be ethical and religious, rather than historical. The narrative has a didactic function in as far as it describes the powerlessness of people in a struggle against God. The narrative is certainly not historically accurate, because a long period of time elapsed between the

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24 Cf. also Stieglitz (1987:46-49). In this short article, Stieglitz connects the ‘Plagues narrative’ in Ex 7-11 to the events narrated in non-biblical sources (e.g. in various documents from Tell el-Amarna and Ugarit). According to him, these may namely refer to the plagues, or at least indicate the plausibility of disasters of this kind.

25 Dillmann & Rijsel (1897:77) and Driver (1911:55).
possible factual events and their literary interpretation in the ‘Plague Narrative’.

Various exegetes do not assume more than a vague historical foundation. Some argue this can be recognised in the fact that Moses, in his negotiations with Pharaoh, threatened to act as a ‘wizard’ in the event that he was refused with regard to the relaxing of slave labour and the celebration of ‘Pesach’ in the desert (see e.g. Beer 1939:46). Others recognise the residence of Israel in Egypt as the only historical point of departure; all other elements in the narrative are unhistorical (cf. e.g. Gunkel 1921, 1/1:50-51). As evidence, the nature of the information in the ‘Plague Narrative’ is referred to. The narrated events follow one another immediately and form a series resulting in a climax. The motif of Pharaoh’s yielding also raises serious doubts as to the realistic historical content of such negotiations. In short, the narrative contains too many improbabilities to lay any sort of claim to historicity. Still others only accept that there may have been a historical core for the old tradition elements of Ex 7-11, but according to them this became strongly legendary (e.g. Scharbert 1989:49). In the actual composition, the emphasis is especially that YHWH has proved to be the ‘I am here for you’ with respect to Israel.

3 Historical reconstruction refuted

Finally, other biblical scholars deny any possibility of historical reconstruction. Thus, C. Houtman posits that the character of the description of the ‘Plague Narrative’ no longer offers the possibility to trace the historical sequence of events accurately (Houtman 1989, Part 2:33). In addition, pointing in the same direction, the conclusions of recent historiographical research, which has not only become sceptical with respect to the natural explanations but also regarding the historicity, brings even the so-called core facts into serious doubt.

According to J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, the theories aiming to understand the plagues as cosmic and natural disasters want to give no more than a ‘naturally’ and scientifically more acceptable explanation of what are primarily fantastic and miraculous biblical stories (Miller & Hayes 1986:64-65). However, to achieve this aim, these theories rely on such hypothetical presumptions and curious correlations of incidental factors, that they cause more problems than they solve. Such an approach to the ‘Plague Narrative’ can therefore only raise suspicions (Miller & Hayes 1986:77-79). With respect to the historicity of the events surrounding the exodus from Egypt, very little can be said with certainty. Here, one finds oneself in the realm of conjecture and a precise reconstruction is certainly impossible. Lastly, in considering all of the above, one must not lose sight of the fact that the text we are analysing is a skilful and theologically influenced literary construction and not a historical report.

J. A. Soggin is also sceptical of the historical approach to the plagues (Soggin 1984:121-124). According to him, the attempts to explain them natu-
rally use arguments that may apply to one or another individual plague, but lose sight all too easily of the fact that the plagues cycle is primarily concerned with the effect of the whole series of plagues. This alone makes the nine first plagues a series of divine signs or miracles. According to Soggin, it is pointless to attempt ‘to rationalise that which is irrational’ (Soggin 1984:123-124). After all, this causes the narrative to lose its point. One should rather consider Ex 7:14-11:10 to be an example of the way traditions functioned in ancient Israel: it is a literary composition and not a historical or legendary text. Ultimately, this narrative is concerned with the confirmation of God’s intervention on behalf of the poor and oppressed. We may thus also conclude that it is of greater importance to search for the theological meaning in the actual text, rather than devoting oneself to the reconstruction of imaginary historical facts.26

D THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING AND FUNCTION OF THE ‘PLAGUE NARRATIVE’

A narrative such as that of the ‘plagues’ in Egypt in Ex 7-11 unavoidably raises many questions for contemporary readers. What is the meaning of this strange story? Which theological message did the writers want to transmit through their tale? In this third and last part of the present contribution, a number of fundamental theological themes that come to the foreground in the ‘Plague Narrative’ will be discussed.

1 Demonstration and recognition of God’s power

Theologically, the ‘Plague Narrative’ seems primarily to be concerned with the theme of the recognition of YHWH.27 In that respect, the plagues are described

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26 Cf. Houtman 1993: Vol 1,186-187: ‘Not just (moderately) critical OT scholars but also conservative scholars consider it their task to reconstruct the history with the use of extra-biblical data. They regard the biblical data as reliable, but also as incomplete, and feel it is justified to fill out the picture. It would seem that in their reconstructions they lean not a little on their own imagination and that their picture of the history, like that of their (moderately) critical colleagues, deviates considerably from what the Bible itself suggests. The question is appropriate if the conservative OT scholars, in their desire to demonstrate that the biblical data are quite compatible with what can be learned from extra-biblical sources, are doing justice to the manner in which the biblical narrative itself wants to be understood’ (parallel with Houtman 1989: Vol 1,182).
See also Houtman 1993: Vol 1,190: ‘It goes without saying that it is not the task of the exegete of the book of Exodus to offer a reconstruction of Israel’s early history. The exegete’s responsibility is to explain and clarify the picture the author of Exodus aims to give’ (parallel with Houtman 1989: Vol 1,185).

as a demonstration of YHWH’s power.\textsuperscript{28} YHWH desires not only to be recognised in the present but also in the future and moreover, by both Pharaoh and Egypt as well as by Israel. This recognition is nuanced with respect to content depending on the subject recognising him. Israel must recognise that YHWH acts protectively for his people and breaks the power of the powerful for them. The Egyptians must recognise that YHWH, the God of Israel, has more power than their Pharaoh and that he steps into the breach for his people in the middle of Egypt. Lastly, Pharaoh must recognise that YHWH is the acting figure throughout the entire event. He must admit that no other god is like YHWH, who is active in his land and is lord even there. This nuance also contains the theological realism of the description. The Egyptians will namely never come to a real belief in YHWH as their God. At most, they might admit how powerful the God of Israel is. The ‘Plague Narrative’ is therefore also written primarily for the faith community of Israel.\textsuperscript{29} For them, the plagues are the radical confirmation of YHWH’s powerful presence among the people.\textsuperscript{30} YHWH shows his lordship by means of the plagues, namely in the liberation he brings about for the Israelites, in such a way as to make them responsible eye-witnesses (e.g. De Vries 1975:71-72, 78). Thus, a demonstration of power leads to recognition, which leads in its turn to testimony (cf. Ex 10:2).

Against this background, it must also be stated that the demonstration of God’s power is not entirely unambiguous. On the one hand, there is a real conflict of power between YHWH and Egypt/Pharaoh (Krašovec 1990:55-56, 65-66). The narrative depicts a sort of war between these two parties. The only choice Egypt has is between complete destruction and yielding to the God of Israel. On the other hand, the plagues are not about pure power. If we consider YHWH’s demonstration of power with respect to its meaning for Israel, it is notably not the conflict but the liberation, which is emphasised.\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, YHWH’s display of power against Egypt contains a consoling element, namely the reassurance that this power, which protects the Israelites, is not broken in foreign territory. YHWH reigns in Egypt too. Therefore, everyone must recognise him as the one and only God.

Parallel to these aspects of meaning, which the redactor has recorded in the text, the ‘Plague Narrative’ also contains a double message for later readers.

\textsuperscript{28} Cf. also Brottier (1989:39-64, especially 52-53). Brottier describes how various Church Fathers, amongst others Theodoret, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nazianze and Eusebius of Caesarea interpret the plagues in Ex 7-11, which are presented as divine signs, as a ‘divine pedagogy of revelation’: they reveal YHWH’s power and must thereby lead to recognition of him.

\textsuperscript{29} Cf. Durham (1987:105-106): ‘The mighty-acts accounts are written from faith to faith’.


\textsuperscript{31} See also above and Burns (1983:69); Eising (1961:87); Krašovec (1990:55-56, 65-66).
On the one hand, and in agreement with Pharaoh’s perspective, a warning (see e.g. Dillmann & Rijsel 1897:77; McNeile 1908:46). The spectacle of the hard conflict of power between YHWH and Pharaoh invites the reader to reflect on the mystery of human resistance to the activity of God who liberates people (Burns 1983:69). With a lot of imagination the plagues demonstrate how God crushes any resistance. The ‘Plague Narrative’ warns one not to become like Pharaoh, who lost his freedom because of his stubborn refusal to recognise YHWH and was reduced in his hardness to not much more than a puppet (Gunn 1982:90). On the other hand, the narrative also offers the reader a perspective of hope when read against the background of Israel’s liberation. Ex 7-11 tells of a God who creates new life in death and oppression (Gunn 1982:90). The ‘Plague Narrative’ presents God as the one who breaks the power of the powerful and makes the oppressed rise out of fear and degrading circumstances. This conviction should be an initiative to consider our current struggle of human liberation as a place to encounter God and to experience his power (Burns 1983:69).

2 YHWH as ‘Lord of Creation’ and ‘Master over life and death’

In conjunction with the demonstration of YHWH’s power which should lead to recognition, the ‘Plague Narrative’ just as greatly emphasises that he is the ‘Lord of Creation’. Some exegetes are of the opinion that the ten plagues correspond to ten creation words from Genesis (Zevit 1990:21-23 and 1975/6:197-198, 210-211). Each of the plagues would destroy something YHWH has created. At the end of the tenth plague, all life is destroyed in Egypt and creation is annulled there. In other words, the plagues are a reversal and destruction of creation. Thus YHWH demonstrates that he, who ordered everything, can reduce everything to chaos again. In this way, the ‘Plague Narrative’ indicates didactically that YHWH, Israel’s saviour, is ‘Lord of Creation’.

In close connection with this view, one must consider the depiction of YHWH as ‘Master of life and death’. Indeed, the description of the plagues

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34 See in this respect also Lemmelijn (2001: 407-419).
35 See also Brottier (1989:54-55), who shows how early commentators such as Severinus of Gabala, Philo of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus also saw the connection between the plagues in Ex 7-11 and the creation narrative in Gen 1. According to them, the destructive power of the plagues shows that YHWH is lord and master over creation and all the natural elements. The plagues are a perversion of creation, in which order had been cast aside by sin.
strongly enlightens the contrast between life and death.\textsuperscript{36} The plagues indicate that YHWH is the one who has power over life and death. That is why he has authority and he is owed obedience. All honour is due to him. The liberation from Pharaoh’s tyranny is thanks to him alone. The occurrence of the plagues, of Pharaoh’s downfall and Israel’s liberation is intended to teach that YHWH is lord of the world. To liberate his people and eliminate their enemies, God can employ the powers of the cosmos.\textsuperscript{37} He employs water, wind, air, fire, meteorological phenomena and animals as weapons. Thus, the liberation becomes an appeal to trust in God, a source of hope for the future. YHWH’s action against Egypt is thus interpreted as a paradigm of his action towards those who do not submit to him. Those who recognise and avow YHWH find solace and encouragement in this. Israel is deeply joyous because this liberation brings them another step closer to the realisation of the promises made to the fathers. But this is also a reason for Christians to hope, because this history also gives them courage in times of need and oppression. They may be happy with the eradication of evil, which is directed towards the restoration of a new cosmic harmony.

However, this representation also raises questions. Can a faithful person be happy about the downfall of his or her opponent? Great doubt is raised as to whether God really is the way he is depicted by the authors of Ex 7-11. Is the idea that God destroys people who do not (want to) recognise him, to be interpreted as a great deed of divine providence? This question brings us to a last fundamental question.

3 A violent God?\textsuperscript{38}

As wonderful and attractive as the theological message of the ‘Plague Narrative’ may seem at first sight, the violent overtone of the narrative causes great problems for the contemporary (Christian) reader (cf., e.g., also Kegler 1990:55-57, 71). Why seems God so cruel in the ‘Plague Narrative’? Are the plagues not rather to be considered as the expressions of the capricious behaviour of a tyrannical divinity? Is it really necessary to liquidate all the first-born? Does God only leave Pharaoh alive to display his power with even more wondrous deeds (cf. Ex 9:15-16)?

\textsuperscript{36} In this regard, particularly the view of C. Houtman can be focused on; see Houtman (1989: Vol. 2, 34, 47, 82, 211-214 and Houtman (1988: 15-16, 127-130).

\textsuperscript{37} See also in this regard Knight (1976:54, 59, 65, 68, 72), who indicates that everything that exists can be an instrument in YHWH’s hands. Thus YHWH uses, for example, Pharaoh, a staff, the fish that die or the thunderstorms that appear. According to Knight, even Moses’ role as a prophet and the hardening of Pharaoh are ultimately only elements that fulfil an instrumental function within the realisation of YHWH’s plan.

\textsuperscript{38} See, in this respect, also Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2006:158-167).
Many of these questions are rooted in an incorrect reading and interpretation of the text: the narrative is understood as an actual (historical) event. Moreover, it is not sufficiently taken into account that the depiction of YHWH in this narrative was made by humans and consequently should not be read as the ultimate expression of God’s being or as a revelation of God Himself.

Nevertheless, even a critical treatment of Ex 7-11 still leaves many questions unanswered. I will summarise three of them. Firstly, there is the question of how God should be understood. Secondly, the narrative raises the question of the function of speaking about hardening.39 Finally, criticism must be expressed as to the use of so much violence in the ‘Plague Narrative’. These questions are in fact addressed to the final redactor of the ‘Plague Narrative’. Was his image of God sadistic? What was his position with regard to violence and counter-violence? However one may twist or turn it, the ‘Plague Narrative’ still confronts us with an image of God that glorifies violence. Ostensibly at least, the mechanism of violence and subversive counter-violence is legitimised as the strategy of the god of a minority against a majority.

There are no obvious answers to all these difficulties. Nevertheless, I will attempt to formulate a careful and orienting proposal of explanation. Perhaps one should state that the perspective and the existential situation of the reader/listener determine to a great extent the way in which he or she considers the presentation of the radically violent action of YHWH. Within our considerably comfortable life in the context of Western Europe, we can only concern ourselves with the violence that Egypt as a powerful oppressor is forced to suffer under, because we observe it from a ‘luxury-position’ of prosperity, security and freedom.40 If we ourselves were to be oppressed, have no rights and live day to day unsure of our own lives, would we not rather associate with the other side and be joyous, or at least relieved at the downfall of the oppressing superpower in the narrative? Allow me to make clear, by the use of an example, how the position in which we find ourselves always fundamentally influences our perception of the facts. Watching a film in which the classic good-evil pattern is incorporated – for example, a weak woman is continually beaten by her husband – we, who have chosen the side of the woman, are also almost unquestioningly happy when the guilty party is punished at the end, even if this causes the person in question great harm or if he must pay for the inflicted evil with his life. Such an ending is referred to in a clichéd way as a ‘happy end’,

40 See, in this respect, also Kellenberger (2006:179): ‘Wer unter unerträglichem Lei
densdruck steht, redet elementar und ungeschminkt, wogegen die privilegierten Mäch
tigen sich eher den Luxus leisten können, Mitgefühl und Verständnis für Gegner zu formulieren.’
even if it seems to me, exactly as for Egypt in the ‘Plague Narrative’, anything but a happy ending for the person in question. However, we assume a certain position – choosing the side of the victim – and from that specific position we judge the situation. In other words, this position determines the way in which we consider things, the choice we make and the emotions that surface within us.

The facts of the ‘Plague Narrative’ are no different. The authors and the original listeners did not find themselves in the comfortable position we find ourselves in. They also experienced oppression and fear, most probably in the context of the Babylonian exile. In this threatening situation, they chose the side of the oppressed Israel against the crushing superpower Egypt. The fact that Ex 7-11 narrates how YHWH was on their side and displayed that his power was greater than that of the oppressor, was comforting and encouraging for these people in need. Consequently, the ‘Plague Narrative’ functioned as a story of relief and gave the people a breathing space in their fear. Therefore, people who currently live in oppression can find support and reassurance in this narrative. It is said that they are not left to suffer their fate because YHWH takes their part. Thus, one can state mutatis mutandis for the ‘Plague Narrative’ what M. Vervenne has posited concerning the ‘Sea narrative’ (Ex 13:17-14, 31) when he writes that ‘the “terrible” Sea narrative does resonate with people who are forced to live in doubt and under threat and oppression, here or elsewhere. Rendered powerless by the superior strength of “the strong”, they recognise, in the narrative of yore, their own powerlessness and the hope that God will deliver them.’

E CONCLUSION

In the summary of the manner in which exegesis has treated the ‘facts’ of the ‘Plague Narrative’ in Ex 7-11, one sees an interesting development coming to the fore. The question of the natural background and the historicity of the plagues is approached in remarkably different ways. Older studies treated the natural and historicising explanations extensively, even if they did not necessarily concur with them, whereas this approach is hardly mentioned in more recent research. At most, these explanations are named and critiqued. Interest in the strictly historical character of the ‘Plague Narrative’ no longer seems to play an important role in modern research; at least in as far as it is carried out critically.


42 See also Ausloos & Lemmelijn (2006: 42-44).
Perhaps this evolution fits into broader social development. ‘Modern’ society, to a greater extent than ‘post-modern’ society, was strongly oriented towards the technical and scientific and attributed more importance to explicability and the historical plausibility which this involves. ‘Post-modern’ society focuses attention on the literary character of the narrative and the aesthetic-playful surplus. Against this background, interest in the biblical text, in this case the ‘Plague Narrative’, has gradually shifted from the historical to the literary and theological spheres. 43

With this in mind, the natural explanations seem only to indicate that the so-called ‘plagues of Egypt’ may possibly have happened, but whether or not they actually did has no relevance to the way the narrative functions. Biblical scholars emphasise the fundamental theological message of the narrative and refer to the intentions and the mentality of the biblical authors. In my opinion, the fact that one can indicate a natural background in the literary description of the plagues can be explained fairly easily. The authors of the ‘Plague Narrative’ were firmly rooted in the experienced reality of every day. From this reality they drew metaphors for the proclamation and theological message of the plagues cycle.

The theological content of the ‘Plague Narrative’ in Ex 7:14-11:10 can be reduced to two core statements, with which the remaining textual accents are connected.

1. YHWH brings liberation. From this perspective, human liberation within our history is to be interpreted as a process in which God is active. In this way, our efforts for liberation become a place where we can encounter God.

2. In the ‘Plague Narrative’ YHWH, as ‘Lord of Creation’, demonstrates the highest divine power. People can adopt either of two positions towards this power. Either they recognise God’s presence and obey, or they resist and refuse to submit themselves. In the latter case, YHWH acts harshly towards the people and breaks their resistance.

However, the point about divine power leads us to a number of fundamental difficulties with respect to the current understanding of the ‘Plague Narrative’. The current Christian reader shudders at the image of the cruel god that appears in the description of YHWH’s action in the plagues. The triumphant violence in the ‘Plague Narrative’ remains a fact that is difficult to accept. In addition, YHWH’s hardening of Pharaoh, which seems to predestine his downfall, is a strange motif.44 The questions of the violence in the Old Testament

43 Cf. also Lemmelijn (1996a).
44 See, in this respect, especially Kellenberger (2006).
and the role which God plays in it are undoubtedly complex matters. Ready-made answers to such fundamental questions are certainly not legion. Nevertheless, exegesis should not avoid these difficulties. The violence narrated in the ‘Plague Narrative’ should be an occasion and an invitation to give biblical-critical reflection a theological dimension.

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