

## Only Six Plagues in the Priestly Narrative

Philippe Guillaume

If one includes the transformation of Aaron's stick into a dragon (Exod 7:9-12), the death of the Egyptian firstborn and the drowning of Pharaoh in the sea, Egypt was struck by more than ten plagues<sup>1</sup>. As for the number of sources behind the plagues narrative (Exodus 7-12) and the number of plagues in each source, there is a bewildering array of scholarly opinions, since no consensus has been reached over the relation of the Plague narrative with the *Pessah* and *Massot* instructions (Exodus 12-13) and the Sea narrative (Exodus 14-15)<sup>2</sup>.

The following suggests a new criterion to help isolating the Priestly narrative (P<sup>6</sup>) in Exodus.

### Seven Priestly Plagues?

Properly speaking, P<sup>6</sup> features signs and wonders rather than 'plagues'. William Propp attributes seven plagues to P because P 'evinces a marked penchant for sevens'<sup>3</sup>.

The *tannin* episode (Exod 7:8-13) is not widely considered as a plague, but Propp's analysis convincingly shows that there is no reason to exclude it: Flies and Pest are universally excluded from P<sup>6</sup> but the Boils are widely accepted. This is paradoxical since Propp admits that the Boils episode features the greatest deviation from P's pattern. Nevertheless, Propp selects the Boils and adds the drowning of Egypt to reach seven Priestly signs.

A major difference sets the Boils episode apart from the other P signs: not only Moses is to act while Aaron is a mere helper, but the rod, 'a sure sign of P<sup>4</sup>' is not used. Propp explains away the difference by claiming that Aaron's hands must be free to cast ashes, although only Moses is to cast them in the air. Propp admits that Aaron's marginality is harder to understand<sup>5</sup> and suggests that P may have found it unfitting for the priest-to-be Aaron to cause a defiling disease, or that Aaron and Moses' hands were all

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<sup>1</sup> Propp, Exodus 317.

<sup>2</sup> Lemmelijn, Transformations.

<sup>3</sup> Propp, Exodus 315.

<sup>4</sup> Propp, Exodus 310; Blum, Studien.

<sup>5</sup> Propp, Exodus 311.

required to obtain four fistfuls, which may represent the four compass points<sup>6</sup>. These are desperate attempts to save a seventh plague against all odds.

In fact, the Boils are not essential to establish the inferiority of the magicians since both the swallowing of their sticks by Aaron's dragon and their inability to produce gnats have already established it. The Boils do not belong to P, their striking parallel with Ezekiel 10 leads to postulate an Ezekielian redactor<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, forcing a seventh plague into P<sup>g</sup>'s narrative misunderstands P's motives. Indeed, P has 'a marked penchant for sevens', but P<sup>g</sup>'s overall system is more elaborate than merely repeating a sevenish mantra. Sevens are reserved to creation and Gen 2:2 correctly reports that Elohim accomplished his work in seven days, although the LXX has wrongly reduced them to six days because the translators also misunderstood P<sup>g</sup>'s purpose. Seven expresses Creation and Re-creation (Genesis 7-9): after the flood it takes seven months to dry the land and make life possible again (LXX Gen 8:4.14). By contrast, P<sup>g</sup> attributes number six to destructive episodes: the entire flood narrative extends over 36 weeks (6x6)<sup>8</sup>. Pharaoh is drowned with his 600 choice chariots (Exod. 14:7). The 600,000 Israelite men coming out of Egypt are equally marked for destruction as they will die in the desert instead of entering the land (Num. 14:29).

The plague narrative is another instance of destructive purification in P<sup>g</sup>, and if numbers are significant, six plagues are more likely to make sense here than seven. In fact, this is what Propp discovers, and in spite of the fact that he is looking for seven plagues, he concedes that 'in P, there initially appear to be six'<sup>9</sup>: Dragons, Blood, Frogs, Gnats, Boils, and Firstborn.

Since the plague narrative corresponds to a Flood-like de-creation limited to Egypt<sup>10</sup>, P<sup>g</sup> lists only six signs. Seven is reserved for creative acts.

### Summary

William Propp identified six plagues belonging to the Priestly narrative in Exodus, but then he added an extra one to keep in line with P's predilection for sevens. I claim that six plagues are more likely because P reserves sevens for creative activities and uses number six or multiples of six for purification episodes like the Flood and the Plagues.

<sup>6</sup> Propp, Exodus 331f.

<sup>7</sup> Levenson, *Theology*; Ska, *sortie*; McKeating, *Ezekiel*; Gosse, *livre*; Kohn, *Prophet*.

<sup>8</sup> Najm / Guillaume, *Calendar*.

<sup>9</sup> Propp, Exodus 315.

<sup>10</sup> Zevit, *Redaction*; Fretheim, *Plagues*

## Zusammenfassung

William Propp nennt sechs Plagen, die sich in der Priesterschrift im Buch Exodus finden, aber dann fügt er eine weitere dazu, um der priesterschriftlichen Vorliebe für die Zahl sieben gerecht zu werden. Ich plädiere dafür, dass es doch sechs Plagen waren, weil die Priesterschrift sich die Sieben für die Schöpfungstätigkeit vorbehält, während die Zahl

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Dr. Philippe Guillaume  
 Old Testament  
 Near East School of Theology  
 B.P. 13-5780 Chouran  
 Beyrouth Libanon