

14. Defining the Premise of Plagues (Exodus 7–13)

As Moses outlined in Deuteronomy 28, blessings accrue to those who keep the terms of God's covenants and curses to those who don't. The ten plagues God sent on the Egyptians constituted such covenant curses. But to which covenant did these curses pertain as at that point God had not yet covenanted with the people of Israel as a nation? He had, however, covenanted with their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to preserve their posterity in the earth. But in that case why would covenant curses come upon a people other than Israel's ancestors or their posterity? The answer lies in ancient Near Eastern emperor–vassal covenants that parallel biblical covenants and that explain how they operate.

In brief, the plagues God sent on the Egyptians were for the sake of Israel's ancestors. As in ancient Near Eastern emperor–vassal covenants, plagues or curses come upon any vassal who proves disloyal to the emperor. But those same curses—as in this case—also come upon anyone who infringes on the rights of a vassal who proves loyal. By enslaving the people of Israel and killing their children, the Egyptians infringed on the rights of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's covenant with them provided for the continuation and increase of their posterity, which posterity the Egyptians now endangered.

As the ten plagues on Egypt continued to occur, we observe how God—in the role of emperor—defended the cause of his vassals with whom he covenanted; that is, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We also observe how in situations of crisis, many people harden their hearts as Pharaoh did while others double down and rely on God to keep his word and deliver them. Knowing exactly how the terms of God's covenant operate helps his people gain confidence in the ultimate outcome of any crisis in which the rights of his loyal vassals are violated.

The final curse God sent on the Egyptians added another dimension to the blessings-versus-curses dynamic, one that was prophetic of the future saving role of the Lamb of God—God's firstborn Son in the flesh. While the Passover Lamb substituted for Israel's firstborn sons during the final plague or curse that came on the Egyptians, the death of Egypt's firstborn sons turned the key in getting the people of Israel freed from bondage. The traditional savior role of firstborn sons in individual families meant that after their death the entire Egyptian nation was in danger of disintegrating. On the other hand, the Passover Lamb—in similitude of the Lamb of God—secured Israel's release from covenant curses, including bondage and death. Also important to note is that by this time the people of Israel were in a humbled frame of mind that was ready to turn to the God of their ancestors for deliverance.

The constant “remembering” of these landmark events in times of crisis throughout the history of God's people Israel has served to remind them that their God will deliver them from evil when they keep his commandments that are the terms of his covenants. Reliving these ancient events at the feasts of Passover and Tabernacles has kept in remembrance how God operates within the terms of his covenants. Of utmost importance is that these events typify the end of the world, when these same kinds of blessings and curses repeat themselves:

“I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour out the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth. And the first went, and poured out his vial upon the earth; and there fell a noisome and grievous sore upon the men which had the mark of the beast, and upon them which worshipped his image. And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood” (Revelation 16:1–4).

“And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory. And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the Beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds. And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared” (Revelation 16:8–12).

“And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done. And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, and so great. And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent; and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, for the plague thereof was exceeding great” (Revelation 16:17–21).

“And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities. Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled, fill to her double. How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit as a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her” (Revelation 18:4–8; cf. Isaiah 47:1. 8–11).

Unless God’s people living in Babylon flee in time, they too will suffer her fate. To escape her plagues—God’s curses on Babylon—they must “come out of her.” John depicts God’s oppressed people as a Woman heavy with child. As soon as she gives birth to a deliverer—God’s end-time servant—she flees into the wilderness to escape the power of the Dragon (Revelation 12; cf. Isaiah 48:20–21; 66:7–9). Because at Israel’s exodus out of Egypt, Pharaoh typified the end-time Dragon to which John refers (cf. Isaiah 51:9–11; Ezekiel 29:3), we may assume that the end-time Dragon, too, will be the ruler of a great nation—a superpower on the model of Egypt.