

Pharaoh, Plagues, and Passover

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Texts: Exodus 5:1-2; 7:1-29; 12:1-4 (translation by Richard Elliot Friedman, added following the sermon on pp. 4-6)

One of the several commentaries I've been reading on Exodus is by a professor emeritus of the Old Testament from Luther Seminary, his name is Terence Fretheim. At the outset of his commentary on Exodus, he notes a number of theological themes in the book. Some of them are predictable: liberation, covenant, law, the presence of God, images of God, knowledge of God – of course a book in which God leads people out of slavery and then gives them the Ten Commandments and the Law will deal with liberation and law; naturally a book in which God appears in a burning bush, as a pillar of fire and a cloud will deal with images of God; it makes sense that the only place in the Bible where God tells God's name might be dealing with the theology of knowing God; and yes, heading toward the Promised Land might somehow relate to covenant. These are not surprising. (Although just because these are not surprising doesn't mean that they are not interesting topics!) But, in Fretheim's discussion of theological themes in Exodus, the one he leads off with is "A Theology of Creation." And that got my attention; not just because we are spending some of our time in Exodus during the same time we celebrate the Season of Creation.

I had never really thought about Exodus as creation theology and Fretheim acknowledges that most people don't, writing "The theme of creation is often ignored or noticed only occasionally....It is my conviction that the book of Exodus is shaped in a decisive way by a creation theology."¹ And since this was in the introduction to his commentary, that perspective has certainly shaped my study of Exodus thus far.

Fretheim further contends that Exodus is not primarily a historical narrative as we tend to understand that form. He says its purpose is concerned with theology and *kerygma*, a word which comes from the Greek for preaching. In other words, the purpose is not to describe the history of Israel, it is instead intended to proclaim a message about God. That is not to deny that Exodus is related to and grounded in history – although to what extent is another interesting question that we will get to before too many more weeks. It is not unhistorical – and indeed, its message was written with the needs of a particular historical community in mind. But the point of the book was to tell its audience about God and who we are in God. And this suggests to me that perhaps there is less literalism or factuality involved than if the book's primary purpose was historical. That is, perhaps not every bit of this happened exactly as the story is told.

¹ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation—A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1991) 12-13.

Fretheim makes a couple of points that help to explain what he means by a creation theology approach. It's not just that nature plays a large role in book, although it does. The main point is that what God is doing through the Exodus story is not simply for the benefit of Israel: what God is doing for Israel is what God is doing through Israel for the benefit of all creation. Let me say that again: what God is doing for Israel is what God is doing through Israel for the benefit of all creation. This is not to deny that Israel has a special relationship with God in the Hebrew Scriptures. But God's work with Israel is intended to benefit all of creation.

This point is made at the genesis of the Hebrew narrative, in the story of Abraham, where God begins to work with a particular people. God tells Abram at their first meeting, that he will be the father of many nations, but God says more: "And YHWH said to Abram, "Go from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house to the land that I'll show you. And I'll make you into a big nation and I'll bless you and make your name great. And *be* a blessing. And I'll bless those who bless you, and those who affront you I'll curse. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." All the families of the earth. This is not the only time that God says that the story worked through Israel is for the benefit of all the earth, but it's interesting that here, at the outset of God's call to Abram, it is clear that Abram will be blessed by God, but through Abram, all people will be blessed. God is the God of all the earth, and intends to bless all the earth. And indeed, the purpose of the plagues in Exodus is not to punish Egypt, but to show both the Hebrew people and the pharaoh that God is God of all the earth.

Nonetheless, these are difficult stories, and certainly not consistent with the way most of us understand God in our time. We don't believe God sends plagues, illness, or weather events – at least most of us don't.

So the idea that God sent the ten plagues – the plague of blood that heard this morning, and then plagues of frogs, lice, insect swarm, a plague on Egypt's livestock, boils, hail, locust swarm, a dark darkness, and the final plague, the deaths of all the first born in Egypt: the men, women and the children of Egypt, plus the first born among the animals as well – this is a hard story. And it is harder when we read in the story that God hardens Pharaoh's heart. Why does God harden Pharaoh's heart? OR, why does the person telling the story tell it that way? This is a problem even for children who hear the Exodus story. But, and this is something I never noticed until two of the commentaries I've been reading pointed it out: both Fretheim and Richard Elliott Friedman explain that Pharaoh hardens his own heart more frequently in the story than God hardens his heart. Pharaoh is in no way a passive victim here. And Pharaoh acts on his own heart before God does. Perhaps God intensifies what Pharaoh is already inclined to be? Or perhaps this is a note of Pharaoh's response to the actions of God. Perhaps this emphasizes that God and humans work together, even when they are at odds.

And perhaps we get a clue too in the words that are being used to describe the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Rabbi David Zaslow explains in his book *Reimagining Exodus: A Story of Freedom* that 3 different Hebrew words are used to describe God's work on the heart of Pharaoh: one means to harden; one means to make heavy; and one means to strengthen.

The word to harden, *kashah*, is related to a word for hammered metal – the analogy is with a metalworker, who hammers the metal, softening it in order to harden it and shape it (think of a blacksmith). As Rabbi Zaslow says, “How did God hammer at Pharaoh’s heart? With plague after plague after plague.”²

Walter Brueggemann in his small and very fine book *God, Neighbor, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of Common Good* points out that there are three markers of empire: (1) “empires existed to extract wealth in order to transfer wealth from the vulnerable to the powerful”; (2) “empires pursued a policy of commoditization in which everything and everyone was reduced to a dispensable commodity that could be bought and sold and traded and possessed and consumed”; (3) “empires that practiced extraction and commoditization were fully prepared to undertake violence on whatever scale was required for the success of extraction and commoditization.”³ Examples of empire might include Egypt under the Pharaoh, the Roman Empire, and the example that Brueggemann cites as an example of all three markers: Israel under King Solomon. With this last example, Brueggemann shows that “good” nations can pursue bad policies, and a nation founded on a bedrock of freedom and sense of a special mission from God can lose sight of its purpose. There are certainly modern examples as well.

Clearly, Ancient Egypt under this Pharaoh also epitomized these markers: the vulnerable were creating wealth for the powerful; the people had become commodities: they were slaves; and the Pharaoh was prepared to undertake violence in order to maintain this system.

Fretheim points out that the practices of the Pharaoh were anti-life – they were creation-damaging. So part of what God is accomplishing in freeing the Hebrew people is to restore right relationships in that corner of the world. God’s work isn’t only about freeing the oppressed – it is also about freeing the oppressor. Restoring right relationships is for everyone. And one theme in the Bible as a whole is that a right relationship to the land, even the soil itself, is foundational to enjoying shalom: the peace and well-being that is the outcome of right relationships in all spheres: health, social, economic, and spiritual. God is seeking restorative justice, where the oppressed and the oppressor are both restored to right relationships. God’s mission in the Exodus of Israel is to free everyone, or as Fretheim puts it: “God’s redemptive activity is cosmic in its effects.”⁴ So part of the function of the plagues is to demonstrate that this isn’t just about Pharaoh and the Israelites; it’s about Pharaoh and the creation: empire and earth; and all the earth is YHWH’s, as YHWH asserts in a couple of different places in Exodus (Exodus 9:29 and Exodus 19:5).

² Rabbi David Zaslow, *Reimagining Exodus: A Story of Freedom* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017) 60-61.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *God, Neighbor, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of Common Good* (Waco, TX; Baylor University Press, 2016), 1-2.

⁴ Fretheim, 14.

The plagues are exposing and exacerbating the anti-creation dimensions of Pharaoh's empire. And as the plagues become successively worse and worse, YHWH is in fact de-creating the world, restoring the chaos that preceded Creation, and God will grant the people of Israel a new beginning, which we'll get to next week.

But in the meantime, God sets out the events that will protect the Israelites during the last, most terrible plague, (the death of the firstborns) and as he concludes the instructions, he offers a prequel to instructions for the feast, Passover, that will help the people remember this: "And this day will become a commemoration for you, and you shall celebrate it, a festival to YHWH; you shall celebrate it through your generations, an eternal law." For that is the purpose of both the story and the ritual of Passover, the Word and Sacrament: that we will remember what God has done for us. That is equally true of the Gospels and the Lord's Supper—we tell the stories that we might know how God loves us, and claims us, and frees us to love one another. And we share our meal to remember also – to re-member ourselves into the Beloved Community, a community of persons, not commodities, but persons who have become our neighbors in this Beloved Community at home in creation. Amen.

Translation of today's scripture, as translated by Richard Elliott Friedman and published in his *Commentary on the Torah: with a New English Translation and the Hebrew Text* (New York: HarperOne, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 2001)

Exodus 5:1-2, 7:1-29 (Richard Elliott Friedman translation)

And after that Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "YHWH, God of Israel, said this: 'Let my people go, so they will celebrate a festival for me in the wilderness.'"

And Pharaoh said, "Who is YHWH that I should listen to His voice, to let Israel go?! I don't know YHWH, and also I won't let Israel go."

And YHWH said to Moses, "See I've made you a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron, your brother, will be your prophet. You shall speak everything that I'll command you; and Aaron, your brother, shall speak to Pharaoh, that he let the children of Israel go from his land. And I, I'll harden Pharaoh's heart, and I'll multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh won't listen to you, and I'll set my hand in Egypt and bring out my masses, my people, the children of Israel, from the land of Egypt with great judgments. And Egypt will know that I am YHWH when I reach out my hand on Egypt, and I'll bring out the children of Israel from among them."

And Moses and Aaron did as YHWH had commanded them. They did so. And Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron was eighty-three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh.

And YHWH said to Moses and to Aaron, saying, "When Pharaoh will speak to you, saying 'Produce a wonder!' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it in front of Pharaoh. Let it become a serpent.'" And Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh and did so, as YHWH had commanded, and Aaron threw his staff in front of his servants, and it became a serpent. And

Pharaoh, too, called the wise men and the sorcerers; and they, too, Egypt's magicians, did so with their charms: and they each threw his staff, and they became serpents. And Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs!

And Pharaoh's heart was strong, and he did not listen to them—as YHWH had spoken.

And YHWH said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is heavy. He has refused to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning—here, he'll be going out to the water—and you'll stand opposite him on the bank of the Nile, and you shall take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. And you'll say to him, 'YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying "Let my people go so they may serve me in the wilderness." And here, you haven't listened so far. YHWH said this, "By this you'll know that I am YHWH." Here I'm striking with my staff on the water that's in the Nile, and they'" be changed into blood. And the fish that are in the Nile will die, and the Nile will stink, and Egypt will weary themselves to drink water from the Nile.'"

And YHWH said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and reach your hand over Egypt's waters, over their rivers, over their canals, and over their pools, and over every concentration of their waters.' And there will be blood! And blood will be in all the land of Egypt—and in the trees and in the stones!" And Moses and Aaron did so, as YHWH had commanded. And he raised the staff and struck the waters that were before Pharaoh's eyes and before his servant's eyes, and all the waters that were in the Nile were changed into blood. And the fish from the Nile died, and the Nile had an odor, and Egypt was not able to drink water that came from the Nile. And the blood was in all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh's magicians did so with their charms. And Pharaoh's heart was strong, and he did not listen to them—as YHWH had spoken. And Pharaoh turned and came into his house and did not pay heed to this as well. And all Egypt dug around the Nile to drink because they were not able to drink from the Nile's waters. And seven days were filled after YHWH's striking the Nile.

And YHWH said to Moses, "Come to Pharaoh and you'll say to him, 'YHWH said this: Let my people go so they may serve me. And if you refuse to let go, here I'm plaguing all your border with frogs, and the Nile will team with frogs, and they'll go up and come into your house, and in your bedroom and on your bed and in your servants' house and among your people and in your ovens and in your bowls, and the frogs will go up on you, and on your people and on all your servants.

Exodus 12:1-14

And YHWH said to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying "This month is the beginning of months of the year for you. Speak to all of the congregation of Israel, saying: On the tenth of this month, let them each take a lamb for the fathers' houses, a lamb per house. And if the household will be too few for a lamb, then he and his neighbor who is close to his house will take it according to the count of persons; you shall count each person according to what he eats for the lamb. You shall have an unblemished, male, year-old lamb; you shall take it from the sheep or from the goats. And it will be for you to watch over until the fourteenth day of this

month. And all the community of the congregation of Israel will slaughter it 'between the two evenings.' And they will take some of the blood and place it on the two doorposts and on the lintel on the houses in which they will eat it. And they will eat the meat in this night; they will eat it fire-roasted and with unleavened bread on bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or cooked in water, but fire-roasted: its head with its legs and with its innards. And do not leave any of it until morning; and you shall burn what is left of it until morning in fire. And you shall eat it like this: your hips clothes, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste. It is YHWH's Passover.

And I shall pass through the land of Egypt in this night, and I shall strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human to animal, and I shall make judgments on all the gods of Egypt. I am YHWH. And the blood will be as a sign for you on the houses in which you are, and I shall see the blood, and I shall halt at you, and there won't be a plague among you as a destroyer when I strike in the land of Egypt.

And this day will become a commemoration for you, and you shall celebrate it, a festival to YHWH; you shall celebrate it through your generations, an eternal law.