**Exodus: The Battle for Pharaoh’s Heart**

*“if one’s theology is faulty, one’s spiritual and social consciousness is blunted”*

(Marvin R. Wilson)

Well, did you figure it out?

We wrapped up last Sunday’s sermon with the Bible-brain-teaser-question-thingy: *Which of the plagues was intended to strike the very heart of pharaoh?* Or which, in other words, of the plagues was supposed to be a tipping point in convincing pharaoh of YHWH’s power? If you guessed plague number 10, keep guessing.

**Foundation**

In this article, I want to lay a foundation for our understanding the next sermon in the series that will focus on the plague narrative and what God is doing with Pharaoh’s heart. And I think you’ll find the lesson immensely relevant considering we all have the potential to harden ourselves before God. We all have the potential of pride getting the better of us. Simply put, if your head is too big, you’re an easy target.

**Hidden Agenda**

Remember that God has what Rabbi David Fohrman calls a “hidden agenda” besides simply liberating his people from Egyptian slavery. That agenda is not just to end Israel’s slavery, but to destroy the ideology that makes slavery possible in the first place: an ideology based in Pharaoh’s pagan beliefs. Kill the paganism, kill the possibility of slavery. Biblicaly speaking, Egypt is not just a location from which to be liberated; Egypt is a state of being, a state of thinking, that can affect you long after the chains fall off. This book represents a categorical shift in both the quality and quantity of the revelation of God’s nature from anything we’ve seen previous to Exodus. In other words, God is showing Pharaoh that he is a different kind of God than anything Pharaoh’s polytheistic worldview could conceive. He’s the God of Moses’s first speech in Exodus 5.1: the God who is creator of all and longs for relationship with his creatures. His “hidden agenda” is to convince Pharaoh that there is One Creator God that is over all other powers in the cosmos (Exodus 7.5).

**One Ring to Rule Them All**

We get a sneak peak of this in the first sign Moses performs. In chapter seven, the Lord tells Moses that he can prove himself to Pharaoh by commanding Aaron to throw down his rod. He does, and it turns into a snake. Not to be outdone, through some sorcery or legerdemain, Pharaoh’s servants likewise throw down their rods only to have them transform into snakes, too. This was enough for Pharaoh to rest assured and take his eyes of the spectacle. However, if he were to watch for just a little longer he would’ve noticed something profound: an object lesson meant to convey a monument of truth (Exodus 7.12). For what happens next is a statement of YHWH’s dominion over all other powers: Aaron’s staff swallows up all the other serpent-sticks lying on the ground.

That is essentially the lesson of all the following plagues. “One ring to rule them all” so to speak.

**Reaching the Tipping Point**

We have known for some time that each of the plagues is God exacting judgment on one of the many gods in the Egyptian pantheon, but do we notice that there is more to the story? I mean, there has to be. Just think about it. Pharaoh has a polytheistic worldview, right, where all his gods exert some power over one of the elements – e.g., the sun, moon, fire, ice, animals, sand, the Nile, etc. If the plagues were simply extinguishing one of those powers, what would be Pharaoh’s most likely conclusion? “Well, I guess that god is just upset today. Maybe we didn’t do the right sacrifice. Maybe the sun god has gone to war, or vacation…”

This probably answers why there are 10 plagues instead of one. One plague could be explained with the pagan narrative already inhabiting Pharaoh’s mind, but 10? At what point, exactly, would it just become easier for Pharaoh to start believing there was actually just One Force behind all these plagues instead of counting how many gods could be angry with them at once? Whatever that point is, is a tipping point.

Consider Fohrman: “In his groundbreaking book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn documents patterns in the ways that various sea changes in scientific thinking-what we call scientific revolutions-have taken hold over time. All the great scientific revolutions, from Copernicus to Einstein, he argues, were brought about through the slow accumulation of evidence, creating problems with the reigning paradigm. Eventually, a tipping point was reached, where people moved to a new way of seeing things-an approach that seemed simpler and less convoluted than the old way. The Ten Plagues would have worked in a similar fashion. Each plague alone was another nail in the coffin of polytheism. Eventually, the cumulative evidence brought to bear by the plagues, collectively, would be unimpeachable.”

Now the question for us to consider is not just the number of the plagues – but how the plagues played out specifically that would strike at pharaoh’s heart.