

### The Long Arc of Justice

“Why is the Bible so violent?” A boy asked his mother after reading *The Brick Bible: A New Spin on the Old Testament*, which tells Bible stories in comic book form with LEGO® figures as the characters. She purchased this Bible for her kids because they spent long hours every day playing with LEGO® bricks. But she gave them the book without reading it first.

After her son’s question, she sat down to read it and was shocked at what she found. Page after page shows terrible violence. Hundreds of thousands of people are slaughtered, their blood covering the ground under their dead bodies. Individuals are hanged, stabbed, dismembered, killed in their sleep, and stoned. Women are raped by family members and enemy armies, burned alive, abducted. One is even carved up into 12 pieces with a knife. And Jael hammers a tent peg through the skull of Sisera. It’s as if the author went through the Bible to find the most violent, disturbing stories and then paired them with cute LEGO® figures to make the stories “fun.”

Many years later, when this same woman became part of the team who created *The Peace Table Storybook Bible*, her son’s question was in the back of her mind. That comic book Bible served as a cautionary tale in several ways. First, the team didn’t want to traumatize children by emphasizing and glorifying stories of violence with no context. Conversely, they didn’t want to erase the violence and conflict from the biblical story. It would be easy to do the opposite of what *The Brick Bible* did: They could go through the Bible and choose only the stories of peace and harmony, out of a desire to protect children from all that is unpleasant.

But all of us – including children – live in a world where arguments, conflict, bullying, abuse, sexual violence, gun violence and war are far too commonplace. We all need support for processing and healing from violence perpetrated against us. We all need to know what to do when we hurt someone else. We all need to think about how we read and respond to the violent stories in the Bible as well as the peaceful ones.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in this service, you heard Pete read about the ten plagues and the origin of Passover from *The Peace Table*. The Exodus account of deliverance and salvation is foundational and formative for both Jews and Christians. It’s also one of the most disturbing stories that we have in scripture. How do we engage the difficult questions that arise when we read it? How do we make sense of the violence it contains – some of it unthinkable violence? How does it fit into the idea of shalom that pervades the entire Bible? What does this add to the vision of the world God desires. I don’t have any simple answers to the complex issues contained in this story, but I will offer some insights we could consider as we read it together.<sup>2</sup>

Recall the background to this story as recorded at the end of Genesis and beginning of Exodus. (I know we heard some of this during the storytelling, but I think it’s important to remember the context of the biblical stories we read.) Joseph was taken against his will to Egypt while his father and brothers remained in Canaan. He went from being a prisoner to being the head over all the land of Egypt, second in command only to Pharaoh. When his brothers came to Egypt to ask for food, he eventually revealed himself to them. His father Jacob – also known as Israel – his brothers, and their families moved to Egypt and flourished there.

After Joseph and his brothers died, a different Egyptian Pharaoh rose to power. He didn’t remember what Joseph had done to benefit his nation. He felt threatened by the large number of Hebrew people, so he treated them harshly. He even ordered the deaths of all Hebrew baby boys, but Shiphrah, Puah, and other Hebrew midwives thwarted his plans. The cunning of Jochebed with the assistance of her daughter Miriam and aided by the daughter of the Pharaoh himself saved the life of Moses.

Moses grew up in the palace, was exiled to Midian, married a Midianite woman, and began a family. He encountered God at a fiery bush. God had taken notice of how the Israelite people in Egypt were being

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<sup>1</sup> Chrissie Muecke, “Peace witness through Peace Paths,” Menno Snapshots, Mennonite Church USA, [Peace witness through Peace Paths | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](https://www.mennoniteusa.org/peace-witness-through-peace-paths)

<sup>2</sup> This sermon draws from the Week Nine Prepare Essay written by Timothy Harvey, *Shine: Becoming a People of God*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Shine - Menno Media](https://www.menno-media.org/shine); Pulpit Fiction Podcast, [Proper 18A \(OT 23\) — Pulpit Fiction](https://www.pulpitfiction.com/proper-18a-ot-23); and Waldemar Janzen, *BCBC: Exodus*, Herald Press, 2000, pp.114-153.

mistreated and was ready to rescue them from the oppression of the Egyptians. God commanded Moses to go back to Egypt, gather the children of Israel, and lead them out of their slavery to a good land – a wide open space flowing with milk and honey..

Moses protested. Who am I to lead the people? Who should I tell them you are? What if they don't trust me? What if they don't listen to me? Shouldn't you use a more talented speaker? Why don't you send someone else? But God persisted and Moses finally acquiesced after hearing that his brother, Aaron, would assist him.

A Jewish rabbi retells today's story this way.<sup>3</sup> *Moses spoke to the Israelites of the promises God had made to their ancestors, of the holy land and their destiny to go there. But the children of Israel wouldn't listen to him at first. After 400 years of slavery, they were skeptical. It seemed, from their perspective, like God had completely forgotten about them. And that is where the plagues really begin. You might think the plagues were all about punishing the Egyptians or proving God's might to Pharaoh. And they were. But they were also a powerful way for God to come alive again in the lives of the Israelite slaves.*

*God sent... plagues, one after another. And each time, when it got really bad – Pharaoh would promise again to let the people go. And each time the plague ended, his heart would harden, and the promise would evaporate.*

*So it went with blood and frogs, and on and on for ten plagues. Lice. Insects, Pestilence. Boils. Hail which turned to fire when it struck the land. [Locusts that blanketed the whole land devouring every plant and tree. Complete darkness that confined all Egyptian people to their houses for three days. And the most devastating plague of all – the deaths of the firstborn sons and animals in Egypt.]*

As I contemplate this story, I find the rabbi's list of purposes helpful. Let's think about the first one – punishing the Egyptians. Note that, for the most part, it's God who is delivering the punishment. Moses and Aaron use their staff to turn the water to blood and summon the frogs. But the Pharaoh's magicians are able to duplicate those actions. Aaron raises his staff to turn the dust into gnats – or lice as some translations report – but the magicians can not duplicate that one. After that, it's God who delivers the punishment – the pain, death, and destruction.

What could this say to our present time, especially to those of us who follow Jesus – the one who instructed his followers not to judge others and not to repay evil for evil?<sup>4</sup> In any society there must be laws and consequences for those who don't abide by those laws. And we can do our best to discern the desires of God through reading the Bible, following the example of Jesus, and listening to the Holy Spirit. We can – and should – talk about our beliefs and use them as the basis of what we do, how we vote, and how we try to affect the wider society. But it's not up to us to decide who God should punish. And it's certainly not up to us to punish people on God's behalf.

The second listed purpose is to prove God's power. When I traveled to Egypt early in 2020, I saw first-hand the large number of gods the ancient Egyptians worshipped. I visited many temples dedicated to one god or another. I saw a multitude of hieroglyphics depicting the actions of these gods. It's possible to match each plague with one or more of the Egyptian gods. In each case, the plague demonstrates the power of the one true God over the other gods.<sup>5</sup>

The first plague, turning water into blood, revealed the impotence of Khnum, the guardian of the river; Hapi, the spirit of the Nile; and Osiris, whose blood *was* the Nile. The second plague, the frogs, revealed the impotence of Hapi and Heket, who were symbolized by frogs and were related to Egyptian fertility rites. The third plague, that of lice or gnats, revealed the impotence of Seb, the earth god. The fourth plague, that of flies, revealed the impotence of Uatchit, the god of flies. The fifth plague, the disease on cattle, revealed the impotence of Ptah, Mnevis, Hathor, and Amon, Egyptian gods associated with bulls and cows. The sixth plague, the plague of boils, revealed the impotence of Sekhmet, the goddess of epidemics, and Imhotep, the god of

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbie Katie Mizrahi, "Parshat Va'eira: The Ancient Plagues of Egypt," [Parshat Va'eira: The Ancient Plagues of Egypt - YouTube](#).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:38-48; 7:1-5

<sup>5</sup> See [10 Egyptian gods 10 Plagues.pdf \(rice.edu\)](#), [Understanding the Ten Plagues \(redeeminggod.com\)](#), and [The 10 Plagues - Jehovah Versus the Gods of Egypt.pmd \(biblecharts.org\)](#).

healing. The seventh plague, the hail mixed with fire, revealed the impotence of Nut, the sky goddess, Isis and Seth, Egyptian agricultural deities, and Shu, the god of the atmosphere, weather, and sky. The eighth plague, the swarms of locusts, revealed the impotence of Serapia, the deity who was to protect Egypt from locusts. The ninth plague, that of darkness, revealed the impotence of Re, Amon-re, Aten, Atum, and Horus, all of whom were related to the sun. Finally, the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn sons of Egypt, revealed the impotence of Pharaoh himself, who was worshiped as a deity in Egypt.

As we read this story, we do well to consider the powers that might have a hold on our lives – consumerism, selfishness, hatred, or pride. Addictions of all kinds – food, gambling, social media, internet, pornography, alcohol, drugs. Perhaps we could add nationalism and partisanship to the list. Some of these may have a proper place in our lives, but when overused or taken to the extreme, they threaten our relationships with God, with each other, and with the earth. They threaten our inner peace. Just as Moses and Aaron did, we can recognize and claim the power of God in overcoming the false gods in our lives.

Before I move on to the final purpose, I want to address another aspect of this story – the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. <sup>6</sup> Sometimes we read that Pharaoh hardens his own heart against God, but other times we read that God is the one who hardens his heart. Perhaps the differences could be chalked up to the progression from oral to written story and through its transmission via a variety of languages and translations. But we also need to address the plain reading of the text that makes Pharaoh appear to be the helpless victim of God’s predetermined wrath and raises questions about God’s fairness.

According to Waldemar Janzen, writer of the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Exodus, there are several important points to remember about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

First, the plague stories don’t begin from a neutral starting point, where Pharaoh is completely open to saying Yes or No to each request to let the Hebrew people go. Behind them lies the story of Israel’s long and harsh oppression. Pharaoh entered that course of action long ago, and his character has been shaped by it. At this point it seems almost impossible for him to agree to give up any of his power. He is no more likely to let his Israelite slaves go than an addict is likely to say Yes to a request to give up their addiction immediately. Pharaoh says No, because he has hardened his own heart in his long history as oppressor. When Moses and Aaron make their requests, he simply reveals his character. The requests make visible what is in his heart.

However, at the same time, the state of Pharaoh’s heart does not make God’s requests through Moses and Aaron a mere pretense. Each request genuinely confronts Pharaoh with what it would take to avert each plague. He needs to abandon his cruel hold on the oppressed. He needs to give up his claim of sovereignty and recognize the true God of Israel. Returning to our example of an addict. When confronted with the question of what will stop the impending destruction through addiction – job loss, family disruption, arrest, accident, or another disaster – there is one answer. Stop your addictive activity now. Similarly, Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh with the only way to avert his destruction when they request that he let Israel go now, regardless of the question whether that is still a possibility.

Another layer to this discussion is that Pharaoh is not merely an individual in this story. He is also an archetype or character-type. An archetype is a story element that appears repeatedly in stories from cultures around the world. It symbolizes something universal in the human experience. In Exodus Pharaoh is the Satan-like Arch-Oppressor, the ultimate villain. It’s helpful to remember that the word Pharaoh doesn’t refer to a single king throughout the book of Exodus. This royal title refers to a sequence of Egyptian kings over many generations. It appears that the author of Exodus doesn’t want us to focus on a single king, but to see Pharaoh as an archetype of the pattern of human rebellion that began in the garden of Eden.

Pharaoh is the epitome of human evil. He embodies the strange and tragic turn the human heart can take when one person or society places their own values and well-being above another person or society. Pharaoh is what happens when an entire nation redefines good and evil apart from God’s wisdom.

(I realize that many Christians would apply this last description to our denomination and congregation. We have redefined good and evil apart from God. And that we would apply this description to other groups of

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<sup>6</sup> See Waldemar Janzen, *BCBC: Exodus*, Herald Press, 2000, pp. 452-454 and Tim Mackie, “When Pharaoh’s Heart Grew Harder”, The Bible Project, [When Pharaoh’s Heart Grew Harder \(bibleproject.com\)](http://www.bibleproject.com).

Christians. They have redefined good and evil apart from God. May God give all Christians the wisdom, love, and humility needed to remain in relationship and talk with each other as we each continue to read and interpret the Bible and live out our faith as best as we can.)

As the Exodus story develops, Pharaoh even places his own reputation and pride above the well-being of his own people. This is a horrific situation. It's the Bible's diagnosis of the human condition, not just of one person. God must respond.

Perhaps the inescapable judgment decreed by God and expressed in the statement, "I will harden his heart," is primarily aimed at Pharaoh's role as the self-proclaimed Sovereign and Arch-Oppressor, rather than at an individual historical person. What God has irreversibly decided to crush is the Arch-oppressor as a character-type, and his illegitimate claim to the children of Israel's service through a system of oppression.

Returning to our example of an addict: one may maintain hope for and remain open to accept even the most inveterate addict, while at the same time completely and absolutely condemning and resisting addiction as a way of life.

The predetermined destruction of Pharaoh in this story demonstrates God's absolute and non-negotiable judgment on oppression arising from false claims of divine power. It does not mean that there is no hope of salvation for any particular person. Personal faith and repentance are always an option. Praise God.

Returning now to the rabbi's account of the story and the list of purposes for the plagues. *With every plague, the children of Israel watched as their God fought on their behalf, for their freedom. With every new wonder, they were more and more sure that a terrible and awesome power existed beyond themselves. They began to remember who they were, to have hope that Pharaoh could be defeated, and to imagine that their lives might serve some purpose beyond slavery.*

This story reminds us of who God is. The symbolism found in the tenth plague, when the angel of death passed over the houses marked with the blood of the lamb is foundational to our faith, to our understanding of who Jesus is and how his birth, life, death, and resurrection provide the basis for our salvation. I'll talk more about this next week when we observe World Communion Sunday and share bread and juice together.

This story reminds us of the way God's power works in the world. But this divine power doesn't always sync with the "instant culture" in which we live. We can search for information and answer questions in seconds. We can receive products we order in hours or days, so it can be difficult to appreciate that God still works over long periods of time. The Hebrew people were oppressed in Egypt for many years before Moses arrived on the scene. Moses and Aaron worked for a long time to convince Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go, even as the 10 plagues had a catastrophic impact on Egypt. People in positions of power don't give up that power easily, even when holding onto power becomes costly.

Reading the first fourteen chapters of Exodus can encourage those who work against injustice, oppression, hatred, and other powers that threaten the way God wants the world to be. Discipleship is a long-term commitment. The arc of justice is long. For example, ending the British slave trade required over a century's worth of work by dedicated people among the Quakers. Christians worked to end slavery in the United States, yet the Civil War still happened. There is still much work to do to end racial prejudice.

Many people have deep concerns about a variety of issues including poverty, violence, and care of the earth and all its inhabitants. Seeing a change in issues like these, however, requires many years of focused, detail-oriented work. Engaging these issues in social media, conversations, public protests, and working with service organizations are worthwhile. But it's easy to get discouraged because systemic change requires focused attention on all levels of society over a long time.

We are faced with many challenging circumstances in our society that impact people's lives. The problems are seemingly insurmountable. Sadly, attempts to engage these areas of concern are often met with controversy and argument. It's easier to accept the status quo and move on with our lives.

May God, the God of Moses and the children of Israel, the God who defeated the gods of Egypt, the God who seeks justice help us as we listen to God's voice and as we pray and work for God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.