

אֶת-אֹתֹתַי וְאֶת-מוֹפְתֵי

Signs and wonders: the duel with Pharaoh

Ex 7,1 - 11,10

Before starting, I would like to go through what we have learnt so far. Just a brief stop in order to consult the map and check where we are.

We are focussing on the first part of the Book of Exodus, which will end with Chapter 15 and the Song of Victory after crossing the Red Sea. In its features it is similar to a lamentation (like Psalms 12, 60, 91): first comes the context and an account of the sufferings, then supplication, God's intervention in response to prayer, an intervention that means liberation and salvation, and finally praise, that is, thanksgiving for God's deeds:

(lamentation)

For the choirmaster. For strings. Of David.

1 God, hear my cry, listen to my prayer.

2 From the end of the earth I call to You with fainting heart.

Lead me to the high rock that stands far out of my reach.

(promise, remembrance of who God is)

3 For You are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.

4 Let me stay in Your tent for ever, taking refuge in the shelter of Your wings!

(liberation, fulfilment)

5 For You, God, accept my vows,

You grant me the heritage of those who fear Your name.

6 Let the king live on and on, let his years continue age after age.

7 May his throne be always in God's presence,

Your faithful love and constancy watch over him.

(thanksgiving, praise)

8 Then I shall always sing to Your name,

day after day fulfilling my vows.

(Ps 61:1-8)

The Book of Exodus as we know it, especially from 2:23 to 15:21, was edited according to that liturgical and celebratory scheme.

This text is the very basis of the Passover Seder, of the Passover celebration, which is the first festival celebrating the Jewish profession of faith, deriving from the Exodus and celebrating the Exodus.

Within the Seder, the ‘Pesah Aggadah’ is edited according to that scheme of lamentation, relating how our fathers were prisoners in Egypt, they cried out to the Lord and so on.

We have already analyzed the beginning of the story: slavery and the sufferings of the Jewish people. The Israelites cry out to God and He hears their cry and sees their sufferings. He bends down to free them by calling Moses to be a mediator between His people and Himself. Then come God’s powerful deeds of salvation, thanks to which the Israelites will be able to leave Egypt and start journeying towards the Promised Land. The scheme is as follows:

PRIOR HISTORY: EX 1-2:22 (THE LAND OF GOSHEN)

SECTION 1: EX 2:23-4:31 (MOSES’ CALL AND MISSION)

SECTION 2: EX 5:1-7:7 (WHO IS THE LORD? FIRST SKIRMISHES)

SECTION 3: EX 7:8-13:16 (THE PLAGUES OF EGYPT AND THE PASSOVER)

CONCLUSION: EX 13:17-15:22 (THE CROSSING OF THE SEA)

Section 3 we are now entering, is made up of two parts: the account of the Plagues and then the preparations for the Passover and Passover itself.

Now we will go through the first part of Section 3, chapters 7:8-11:10, dealing with the Plagues.

In this Lectio I will not deal with the ten Plagues in a linear way, one by one and one after the other, but I will deal with them taking in consideration all of them at once. This kind of comprehensive approach will offer us a panoramic view of God’s deeds. Thus we will become more and more able to see Him as the ‘God of Exodus’.

GOD’S WONDERS

1 The Lord then said to Moses,

*‘Look, I have made you as a god for Pharaoh,
and your brother Aaron is to be your prophet.*

*2 You must say whatever I command you,
and your brother Aaron will repeat to Pharaoh
that he is to let the Israelites leave his country.*

*3 But I myself shall make Pharaoh stubborn
and shall perform many a sign and wonder in Egypt. (אֶת-אֲתָתִי וְאֶת-מוֹפְתֵי)*

*4 Since Pharaoh will not listen to you,
I shall lay my hand on Egypt
and with great acts of judgement lead my armies, my people, the Israelites,
out of Egypt.*

5 And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord

*when I stretch out my hand against the Egyptians
and lead the Israelites out of their country.'*
(Ex 7:1-5)

The section we are dealing with comes immediately afterwards the revelation of the name of the God of Exodus as the God of history, therefore it is its demonstration, therefore it is the account of the epiphany of the absolute sovereignty and of the salvific power of the God of Exodus.

Absolute sovereignty over and against idolatry,
over and against any arrogance or abuse of power of man over man,
over and against the kingdom of sin
both on the personal level and on the social – that is, political-economical – one.

This section of Exodus is the exaltation of the power of Israel's Father over the arrogance of him who wants to be their master.

At first, the biblical text does not make use of the term 'plagues', but rather of 'signs and wonders', '*et 'ōtōtay w^e 'et mōftay*'.

They are 'signs' of God's absolute and unique sovereignty against any form of idolatry.

They are 'wonders', that is, the salvific power of the God of Exodus, His power to work wonders for us.

Nowadays the events related in chapters 7-10 raise the following doubt: are they natural phenomena due to the climatic or meteorological conditions of Egypt or are they miracles and exceptional phenomena?

Biblical man did not know these modern distinctions... The categories of 'natural' and 'supernatural' start to appear in the 19th century. Those questions are typical of modern man.

In the Scripture, 'miracle' or 'wonder' is all that God works for us:

'all' means God's wonders;
all deeds performed by God in the Exodus are miracles,
because it is Him who performs them,
because they are gratuitous,
they are surprises, incredible things,
undeserved and that cannot be deserved.

The term 'miracle' also implies that everything is a gift, a gratuitous intervention on God's part in favour of His people.

What the Scripture means is that 'God performed wonders for us', as the Psalms say when they sing about or give praise to God for the epic deeds of Exodus:

Remembering the Lord's great deeds, remembering Your wonders in the past...
(Ps 77:12)

You are the God who does marvellous deeds, brought nations to acknowledge Your power (Ps 77:15)

For You are great and do marvellous deeds, You, God, and none other. (Ps 86:10)

*Remember the marvels He has done,
His wonders, the judgements He has spoken. (Ps 105:5)*

*Shouts of joy and salvation, in the tents of the upright,
'The Lord's right hand is triumphant,
the Lord's right hand is victorious,
the Lord's right hand is triumphant!'* (Ps 118:15-16)

*He alone works wonders,
for His faithful love endures for ever. (Ps 136:4)*

As you can see, the aim is not to describe or to chronicle. The Scripture does not deal with seasonal, meteorological, atmospheric, epidemiological, pathological questions; it does not make use of the modern language of biological, medical, natural sciences.

The Scripture makes use of a religious language, intended to proclaim the 'great things' that God did for us. It highlights the history of salvation which is fulfilled in human history; it highlights the Kingdom of God coming in the midst of human kingdoms; it highlights life where there is death, hope where all is lost; it highlights God's actions in human history. It relates all that.

We, modern men and women, try to find a natural and scientific explanation to everything; we try to reconstruct the events, which is not so difficult. The phenomena that supposedly explain the Plagues are frequent in the Nile delta: its waters may be polluted by iron particles when the river erodes its banks; its water, polluted by dead fish, may be the right environment for insects and frogs to reproduce, and that may bring diseases and death. There may be droughts... In the same way, it is easy to imagine an invasion of locusts, a tempest, hail, a sandstorm obscuring the sky. Someone has gone so far as to attribute the death of the first-born to guerrilla skirmishes which could have occurred during the night of the flight.

However, trying to find all those explanations is a sterile exercise: we would explicitly eliminate God, His intervention would become useless. By interpreting the Plagues so, we would hide God, while in fact, by his account, the narrator of the Book of Exodus intends to let us know about God.

In the Scripture, religion plays a central role in framing the events: there are no events that can be considered outside of religion; so any attempt to regard them as simply natural or human events is destined to fail. They are all handed down as songs or liturgical celebrations and we can comprehend them only as such, we can relate them only as such.

And we can relate that God is ‘I am who I am’, that is, He can be recognized for what He is by what He does: therefore, our Redeemer, our Liberator, our Saviour, the God who gratuitously acts, the God of grace.

A HARDENED HEART

*The Lord then said to Moses,
‘I shall inflict one more plague on Pharaoh and Egypt,
after which he will let you go away.
When he lets you go, he will actually drive you out!
(Ex 11:1)*

Here, when the death of the first-born is announced, we find for the first time the term *nega* ‘, נֶגַע, *piaga*, in Latin ‘plaga’, which does not mean primarily ‘wound’, but ‘blow’, ‘attack’, ‘damage’.

By this vocabulary and by this literary structure, the text of the Exodus is in fact relating a duel, a struggle between two powers with many ‘rounds’. *’ādōnay*, deals many blows to Pharaoh, up to the mortal and decisive one which ratifies the victory of the Former over the latter.

It is a duel similar to David and Goliath’s, Elijah and Baal’s in the Scripture, or Hector and Achilles in Homer’s books.

We find the first skirmishes of this duel in Section 2. When Pharaoh is ordered to let the people go for the first time, he responds by hardening his oppression of the Jewish people and their labour:

*‘Do not go on providing the people with straw for brickmaking as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But you will exact the same quantity of bricks from them as before, not reducing it at all, since they are lazy, and that is why their cry is, “Let us go and sacrifice to our God.” 9 Give these people more work to do, and see they do it instead of listening to lying speeches.’
(Ex 5:7-9)*

We perfectly know that this is the typical reaction of any political regime: when they have to face opposition, they will react violently, as they believe that violence and terror are the only means that can make people change.

On one side there is the Kingdom of God, and the great appeal on *’ādōnay*’s part: God – whose name is ‘the One who does wonders for us’ – wants to free His people so that they can worship and serve Him in the desert. On the other side there is a contestant who does his best to defend himself, to go on retaining ownership of his self and of his life, to go on being ‘the master’.

Pharaoh is the dramatised personification of antagonism towards God, His Kingdom, His absolute sovereignty; and of stubborn resistance to God, always

recurrent in man: it is an endemic disease in man's relationship with God, originated by man's will of power over himself and other people, by man's self-centredness.

The proof of that is the recurring refrain of a stubborn and hardened heart:

*But I myself shall make Pharaoh stubborn
and shall perform many a sign and wonder in Egypt. (Ex 7:3)
Pharaoh, however, remained obstinate and, as the Lord had foretold,
refused to listen to Moses and Aaron. (Ex 7:13)*

The Lord then said to Moses, 'Pharaoh is adamant.

He refuses to let the people go. (Ex 7:14)

*Pharaoh remained obstinate and, as the Lord had foretold,
refused to listen to Moses and Aaron. (Ex 7:22)*

*But Pharaoh was obstinate and, as the Lord had foretold,
refused to listen to them. (Ex 8:15)*

*But the Lord made Pharaoh stubborn and, as the Lord had foretold to Moses,
he did not listen to them. (Ex 9:12)*

*Pharaoh was stubborn and, as the Lord had foretold through Moses,
refused to let the Israelites go. (Ex 9:35)*

*But the Lord made Pharaoh stubborn,
and he did not let the Israelites go. (Ex 10:20)*

*But the Lord made Pharaoh stubborn,
and he did not let the Israelites go. (Ex 10:27)*

*Moses and Aaron worked all these wonders in Pharaoh's presence,
but the Lord made Pharaoh stubborn,
and he did not let the Israelites leave the country. (Ex 11:10)*

Pharaoh is the personification of the refusal to listen or to believe in a biblical sense, that is, to believe which is equal to obey, to obey in faith.

It is the personification of postponing conversion, of being deaf to God's warnings, of self-centredness, of the will of power and of resistance.

According to a school of rabbinical thought which follows Ramban (Nahmanide), a 13th century rabbi, Pharaoh's hardened heart, his being incapable of conversion, is

due to a very serious fault or to numerous transgressions... so that the transgressor who freely commits those acts, loses any opportunity of conversion, T^šubâh. Such a person loses the privilege of repenting of his sins...

*Then it is not God who decrees that Pharaoh should keep on oppressing the Israelites, but rather it is Pharaoh himself who decides to do so and who consequently loses the opportunity of conversion, T^šubâh.
(Ramban)*

Due to his stubborn resistance, Pharaoh is no longer free to choose. His conscience is hardened and incapable of choosing good and of recognizing the

Creator and Lord of all. The invincible Pharaoh, direct descendant of the god of the sun, endowed with an absolute divinity, ends up by being utterly powerless: the humbled Pharaoh is even unable to exercise the fundamental freedom of choice, essential heritage of any human being.

Slaves are freed and the oppressor becomes a slave.

It is interesting to note that in this commentary the *T^ešubâh*, which is an expression of the freedom of choice when changing one's own actions, is not an inalienable right, but rather a privilege that can be lost.

An Italian rabbi, Rav Obadia Sforno, an exegete of the 15th century, gives a very beautiful interpretation which reveals his genius, even though it is just the opposite of Ramban's. He states that 'the gate of the *T^ešubâh* is never closed'. He says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would be unable to respond positively – out of fear – at the announcement of the first few plagues. God wanted to lead Pharaoh to recognise Him as Lord, to recognise His power and His love for His people. And then, He wanted to lead him towards a freedom of choice originating from his adherence to His salvific will.

By letting His people go, Pharaoh would have known the Lord:

'Who is the Lord,' Pharaoh replied, 'for me to obey what He says and let Israel go?

I know nothing of the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.' (Ex 5:2)

Right. Here the aim is to reach freedom of choice, the *T^ešubâh*: through the plagues, God is slowly bending Pharaoh's stubborn heart to His will. By His slow and patient pedagogy Pharaoh is being led to the knowledge of *'ādōnay*. Pharaoh had but one way to know the Lord. And given that the Lord can be known only by experience, Pharaoh's experience should have consisted in *letting His people go*. As he rejects the offer, he cannot know Him.

However, both the rabbinical and the Christian commentaries teach us that the plagues are not God's punishment, and that He is not a vengeful and sadistic god who enjoys making other people suffer.

On the contrary, the plagues tell us that God is a patient educator, who issues nine warnings before the final blow. Nine times He enters into negotiations in order to avoid an irreparable damage, due to lack of docility and to the inability to listen. The Midrash Rabbah on the Book of Exodus relates that the plagues lasted eight or nine months; according to the Mishna Eiduyot, one whole year.

The death of the first-born is the result of a hardened heart, renouncing fertility and life. Pharaoh dies of the same evil he caused to Israel, wounded by the evil that he did at first, the decree to kill any first-born son of the Hebrews. He is still like that.

God hardens Pharaoh's heart: the manifestation of His goodness, of His salvific will, of His fatherhood as far as Israel is concerned, as well as His being a defender of

the oppressed and of slaves, highlights, shows, what in Pharaoh's mind is resisting all that.

We find the same kind of logic in the Gospel:

Then the disciples went up to Him and asked, 'Why do You talk to them in parables?' In answer, He said, 'Because to you is granted to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not granted. Anyone who has will be given more and will have more than enough; but anyone who has not will be deprived even of what he has. The reason I talk to them in parables is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding. So in their case what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah is being fulfilled:

Listen and listen, but never understand!

Look and look, but never perceive!

*This people's heart had grown coarse,
their ears dulled,*

*they have shut their eyes tight
to avoid using their eyes to see,*

their ears to hear,

their heart to understand,

changing their ways

and being healed by me.

(Mt 13:10-15)

God's acting is a new measure, showing and radicalizing the choices of one's own heart. Before God's Word and deeds, those choices were perhaps hidden to the heart itself. When we accept or resist God's action, we will know and reveal our own heart: either a hardened heart, a heart of stone, or a new heart on which the Lord's Torah has been inscribed.

I shall give them a single heart and I shall put a new spirit in them; I shall remove the heart of stone from their bodies and give them a heart of flesh, 20 so that they can keep my laws and respect my judgements and put them into practice. Then they will be my people and I shall be their God. (Ezk 11:19)

Consequently, the section we are dealing with is not only a story about the Exodus, but also the mirror, the permanent paradigm of the relationship between God and us. The refrain of the hardened heart can be applied to the people of believers.

'I know these people; I know how obstinate they are!' (Ex 32:9)

Because this people approaches me

only in words,

honours me only with lip-service

while their hearts are far from me... (Is 29:13)

*Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah,
as at the time of Massah in the desert,
when your ancestors challenged me,
put me to the test, and saw what I could do!
For forty years that generation sickened me,
and I said, 'Always fickle hearts;
they cannot grasp my ways.' (Ps 95:8-10)*

The duel between God and Pharaoh is a permanent mirror of spirituality, the history of our own relationship with God as individuals, as a community, as Church and humankind.

THE THREE WAVES

The Plagues follow an exact scheme: they are divided into three 'waves', increasingly harsh and widespread.

1. The water turns to blood	warning	Go to Pharaoh tomorrow morning	Ex 7:14-25
2. The frogs	warning	Go to Pharaoh	Ex 7:26-8,11
3. The mosquitoes			Ex 8:12-15
4. The horseflies	warning	Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh	Ex 8:16-28
5. Death of the Egyptians' livestock	warning	Go to Pharaoh	Ex 9:1-7
6. The boils			Ex 9:8-12
7. The hail	warning	Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh	Ex 9:13-35
8. The locusts	warning	Go to Pharaoh	Ex 10:1-20
9. The darkness			Ex 10:21-23
10. Death of the first-born			Ex 11:4-7

As we can see, every three plagues there is a recurrent pattern, and three plagues make a 'wave'. In each wave, the first two plagues are preceded by a warning, while the third one occurs without warning. We can also detect the cyclical pattern of the order given to Moses.

We can see also that in the second wave there is a repeated refrain (cf Ex 8:18-19; 9:3-7; 9:11), that is, that the plague will affect only the Egyptians, not the Hebrews. The land of *Gōšēn*, גֹּשֶׁן, will remain separate from the rest of Egypt.

The third wave includes plagues of enormous proportions: the link between the three plagues is the harshness of the phenomena. While the previous plagues affected properties (houses, cattle, crops), the plagues of the third wave affects the human body.

While the plagues become harsher and harsher, Pharaoh's power, as well as the power of his magicians and servants, decreases.

In the first row of plagues they manage to reproduce the sign, blood or frogs, as they had previously managed to reproduce the sign of the staff turned into serpent:

Then Pharaoh in his turn called for the sages and sorcerers, and by their spells the magicians of Egypt did the same. Each threw his staff down and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs. (Ex 7:11-12)

Throughout the whole of Egypt there was blood. But by their spells the magicians of Egypt did the same; Pharaoh remained obstinate and, as the Lord had foretold, refused to listen to Moses and Aaron. (Ex 7:21-22)

But by their spells the magicians did the same, bringing frogs over the land of Egypt. (Ex 8:3)

At the beginning of the second wave of plagues, the magicians are unable to reproduce the sign of mosquitoes:

By their spells the magicians tried to produce mosquitoes in the same way but failed, and there were mosquitoes on man and beast. So the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God'. (Ex 8:14-15)

Their efforts are useless. In fact they are not present: 'They were unable to avoid the humiliation of the boils' (Ramban).

And the magicians could not compete with Moses in the matter of the boils, for the magicians were covered with boils like all the other Egyptians. (Ex 9:11)

The first wave ends with their inability to reproduce the plague; the second wave ends with their inability to preserve themselves from the effects of the plague.

When the eighth plague comes, Pharaoh's officials beg him to yield to Moses' requests, as Egypt is on the brink of ruin:

At which, Pharaoh's officials said to him, 'How much longer are we to be tricked by this fellow? Let the people go and worship the Lord their God. Do you not finally realise that Egypt is on the brink of ruin?' (Ex 10:7)

According to rabbinical thought, the three waves correspond to three teachings.

The first wave proves God's existence to Pharaoh, as we read in Ex 7:17: 'I am the Lord'. At the end of the third plague, in Ex 8:15, the magicians state: 'This is the finger of God'.

The second wave teaches that God is involved in man's affairs through His Providence, as we read in Ex 8:18: 'I am the Lord, here in this country'. He controls the life of the world, and spares the Israelites the plagues.

The third wave shows God's omnipotence, that His power is stronger and loftier than any other being's, as we read in Ex 9:14: 'There is no one like me in the whole world'.

These are three steps that make someone grow in faith, three steps that make someone go back to Him: to acknowledge God's existence; to acknowledge that He is involved in man's history; to acknowledge that He is the Strong One.

These teachings come not only from Moses' words, who repeats God's Word, but also from the whole of creation:

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
the vault of heaven proclaims His handiwork,
day discourses of it to day,
night to night hands on the knowledge.
No utterance at all, no speech,
not a sound to be heard,
but from the entire earth the design stands out,
this message reaches the whole world. (Ps 19:1-5)*

The first row of plagues affects the subterranean kingdom (waters, the frogs) and the earthly one (mosquitoes from the dust of the earth).

The second row affects the creatures inhabiting the earth, both domestic animals and wild ones, as well as men (insects, cattle, man).

The third row regards the skies (hail, locusts, darkness).

The progression of the plagues clearly shows that there are no limits to the power of the God of the Hebrews, and that everything that exists, in each and every dimension, is part of the process of liberation of the people of God: it becomes a liberating word, calling to conversion.

THE TEN WORDS OF ANTI-CREATION

*By ten words the world was made: and what did God want to teach us by that?
Why didn't He create it by one word only?
In order to punish evil men more harshly,
those who destroy the world created by ten commands;
and in order to give a better reward to the just,*

to those who care for a world created by ten commands.

Ten generations passed from Adam to Noah, so that everybody could know how great His leniency is, given that those generations were arousing His anger, until He sent upon them the waters of the Flood.

Ten generations passed from Noah to Abraham, so that everybody could know how great His leniency is, given that those generations were arousing His anger, until Abraham our father arrived, and reaped their reward.

Abraham underwent ten trials, and he managed to pass the tests. This was to show how great the love of Abraham our father was.

Ten miracles were made for our fathers in Egypt, and ten miracles on the sea.

Ten plagues God sent over the Egyptians in Egypt, and ten plagues over the sea.

Ten times in the desert our fathers tempted the Holy One, that He may be blessed.

Ten miracles were made for our fathers in the sanctuary...

Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath...

(Misha, Pirquè Aboth, V, 1-6)

In the Book of Genesis the words of creation are ten in number. The phrase, ‘God said’, *wayyōmer ’elōhîm*, (וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים) occurs ten times in Genesis 1 (lines 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29), that is, before any single work of creation.

To these 10 occurrences of ‘God said’ correspond the Ten Words of Sinai: as the world exists thanks to God’s ten words, so through obedience to the ten words of the Decalogue man can really exist as a man, and scattered and enslaved tribes can exist as a free and journeying people.

[Moses] stayed with the Lord for forty days and forty nights, eating and drinking nothing,

and on the tablets he wrote the words of the covenant

– the Ten Words. ‘ăsereth hadd^ebārîm (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים).

(Ex 34:28)

‘In the beginning’ it is God’s will that creates everything.

And here it is God’s will that creates a people of free men. Through ten plagues, through ten words once again, God works the de-creation of a world based on power and on oppression of the poor and needy.

The plagues of Exodus evoke the words of the first chapter of Genesis, and show a world going back – step after step – to the initial chaos.

For instance, the water turns to blood. God had divided the waters “under the vault from the waters above the vault” and placed the earth in between. Beings of flesh and blood came to live on the earth. Now that water turns to blood, it is as if that separation – water above, water under, and flesh in between – had ceased to exist and the three things were once again intermixed.

Frogs come out of the water to invade the earth in a renewed chaos. Not only do they invade the earth, but also go into Pharaoh's palace and clamber onto him. The text actually says that the frogs go into Pharaoh's bowels, while they should live next to the water.

Dust turns into mosquitoes: the earth that produced living beings in Genesis now produces something that bites and destroys.

From the fourth plague onwards, God draws a distinction between the land of *Gōšen*, where the Hebrews live and are not affected by the plagues, and the rest of Egypt, which is affected by the plagues. Separation is also part of the work of creation: God divides light from darkness, water from dry land, and so on.

During the plague of the hail, it seems as if the sky were no more supported by the firmament and fell down to the earth, breaking it into pieces: this, too, is part of the work of de-creation.

The locusts destroy everything that the earth had produced on the third day of creation.

The ninth plague, darkness, is just the opposite of what God did on the first day of creation, when He divided light from darkness and called light, 'day', and darkness, 'night'. Now, it is daytime and there is darkness. In the Hebrew text the terms used here and those used at creation are the same:

wîhî ḥōšēk, (וַיְהִי חֹשֶׁךְ) let there be darkness

y^ehî 'ôr, (וַיְהִי אֹר) let there be light.

The plagues are an anti-creation, leading us to realize that what we regard as 'normal' originates in fact from man welcoming the Lord's Torah, and from God blessing the earth, as He did on the seventh day of creation. It is His blessing that allows things to be in the right order. The simple fact that the world goes on existing is a sign of God's blessing and love.

FOR ISRAEL AND FOR THE CHURCH

The plagues are the signs and wonders that God performs to free His people.

More than once the prophets would remind Israel of what happened to Egypt owing to the Egyptians' sins. If Israel did not convert themselves, the same would happen to them.

*I even gave you clean teeth in all your towns and a shortage of food in all your villages and still you would not come back to me – declares the Lord.
I even withheld the rain from you full three months before harvest time; I caused rain to fall in one town and caused no rain to fall in another; one field was rained on and the next for want of rain dried up; two towns, three towns went tottering to one town*

for water to drink but went unsatisfied, and still you would not come back to me – declares the Lord.

I struck you with blight and mildew, I dried up your gardens and vineyards; the locusts devoured your fig trees and olive trees and still you would not come back to me – declares the Lord.

(Am 6:6-9)

Amos would remind Israel of God's deeds, so that Israel may go back to the One who redeemed them. Joel would do the same: 2:1-11 is an extraordinary text, prophesying about an invasion of locusts on the Day of the Lord:

Blow the ram's horn in Zion, sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let everybody in the country tremble, for the Day of the Lord is coming, yes, it is near.

Day of darkness and gloom, Day of cloud and blackness. Like the dawn, across the mountains spreads a vast and mighty people, such as has never been before, such as will never be again to the remotest ages.

In their van a fire devours, in their rear a flame consumes. The country is like a garden of Eden ahead of them and a desert waste behind them. Nothing escapes them. They look like horses, like chargers they gallop on, with a racket like that of chariots they spring over the mountain tops, with a crackling like a blazing fire devouring the stubble, a mighty army in battle array.

At the sight of them, people are appalled and every face grows pale. Like fighting men they press forward, like warriors they scale the walls, each marching straight ahead, not turning from his path; they never jostle each other, each marches straight ahead: arrows fly, they still press forward, never breaking ranks.

They hurl themselves at the city, they leap onto the walls, swarm up the houses, getting in through the windows like thieves.

As they come on, the earth quakes, the skies tremble, sun and moon grow dark, the stars lose their brilliance. The Lord's voice rings out at the head of His troops! For mighty indeed is His army, strong, the enforcer of His orders, for great is the Day of the Lord, and very terrible – who can face it?

(Jl 2:1-11)

Israel was spared the plagues of Egypt. But if they are not faithful to God, they will undergo the same ordeal. Faithfulness to God must be renewed every day, and God will use every means to make Israel serve Him, even going so far as to use His power. The plagues are therefore the sign that God still cares for His people, and never stops calling them back to Himself, offering them His salvation.

However, the plagues have to do not only with Egypt, Pharaoh and Israel. They have to do with the Church as well. The theme of the plagues occurs more than once in the New Testament too, as a solemn warning addressed to the Church: as God did not spare Egypt, as He did not spare Israel, He will not spare the Church either, if she is unfaithful to Him.

*When the first-fruits are made holy, so is the whole batch; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. Now suppose that some branches were broken off, and you are wild olive, grafted among the rest to share with the others the rich sap of the olive tree; then it is not for you to consider yourself superior to the other branches; and if you start feeling proud, think; it is not you that sustain the root, but the root that sustains you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off on purpose for me to be grafted in,' True; they through their unbelief were broken off, and you are established through your faith. So it is not pride that you should have, but fear: if God did not spare the natural branches, He might not spare you either.
(Rm 11:16-21)*

What is a threat to Israel, may become a threat to the Church too.

The theme of the plagues occurs frequently in Revelation. There the plagues are presented as 'labour pains' of the New Jerusalem, rather than scourges. The New Jerusalem is the assembly of the hundred and forty-four thousand people, plus a numberless crowd which is Israel and the whole humankind.

The scourges and the plagues give birth to the citizens of the Heavenly Jerusalem, saved from the old world which is destined to be destroyed, saved from evil, and led to inhabit the new heavens and the new earth, where each and every man or woman can be like the virgin bride ready to be presented to the Lamb-Bridegroom.

God's judgement on the world, the fruit of His pedagogical action, is the statement that God is love and mercy offered to everybody. This kind of judgement is possible thanks to the death of the First-Born Son, God Himself, on the Cross. God can forgive us because He gave His life for us through Jesus Christ.

*No one can have greater love
than to lay down his life for his friends.
(Jn 15:13)*

This is what God does.

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER

1) There is a lot in this Lectio we can take cues from, both for our meditation and our prayer. These cues can help us revise many moments of our life, even difficult ones. We get these cues so that we can find the way back home, and we can return as children to Him who is our Father.

Let us beg the Lord that He may keep on talking to us and renewing our hearts.

We can make use of Ezk 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; Jr 31:34; and also of the gospel text of the disciples from Emmaus.

2) It could be interesting to walk on the 'path of the heart' in the Psalter, to see what does inhabit the heart, what moves it, what paralyses it, what makes it live.

The word 'heart' occurs in 122 lines.

We can pray with the psalmist so:

God, create in me a clean heart... (Ps 51:10)

*Of You my heart has said, 'Seek His face!'
Your face, Lord, I seek... (Ps 27:8)*

*The Lord is my strength and my shield,
in Him my heart trusts.
I have been helped; my body has recovered its vigour,
with all my heart I thank Him. (Ps 28:7)*

3) God is the creator and by His blessing He keeps creation alive.

This is a basic point of Jewish spirituality. Jewish prayers invariably ends with:

*Blessed are You, Lord, King of the World...
bārûk 'attâh yhw̄h 'ēlōhênû melek hā'ôlām*

The Jews have to say at least 100 blessings per day: morning and evening prayers alone contain at least 60 blessings! And the occasions to bless God are multifarious: you can bless God when you see a wise man, when you see a king, when you see a minister, when you see a cripple, and so on. Everything turns into an occasion to bless God, who created weird, beautiful, good things...

I think we should try to find in our days 100 reasons to bless God. Here I enclose some Jewish blessings, before and after meals, as an example:

QIDDUSH (Blessing before meals)

Blessing on the chalice:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the world, who create the fruit of the vine.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the world, who sanctified us by Your precepts and took pleasure in us; and who, out of love and benevolence, gave us Your holy Sabbath as our inheritance, as a memorial of the work of creation, because it is the day that inaugurated the holy gatherings, remembrance of the exodus from Egypt.

Blessed are You, Lord, who sanctify the Sabbath.

Blessing on the bread:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the world, who make bread sprout from the soil.

BIRKHAT HA-MAZON (Blessing after meals)

The One who nourishes (ha-zan)

Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the world, who nourish the whole world by Your goodness, grace and mercy. He gives food to any flesh, because His grace towards us and His great goodness last for ever. We never lacked, and we will never lack any good, for the sake of His great Name, because He feeds and nourishes all. Blessed are You, Lord, who nourish everybody.

Blessing of the land (birkhat ha-ares)

We do thank You, Lord our God, as You gave us as inheritance a desirable land, good and wide, the Covenant and the Torah, life and peace. For all these things we thank You and bless Your great and holy Name, always and for ever. Blessed are You, Lord, for the land and for food.

Blessing of Jerusalem (birkhat Jeruřalajim)

Have mercy, Lord our God, on Israel Your people, on Jerusalem Your city, on the kingdom of the House of David Your Messiah, and on the great and holy house Your Name has been invoked upon. Hasten to re-establish in our days the kingdom of the House of David; hasten to rebuild Jerusalem; let us go back to her so that we may rejoice in her. Blessed are You, Lord, who in Your mercy rebuild Jerusalem. Amen.

The Good One and the One who does good (ha-tov we-ha-metiv)

Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the world, our Father and our king, the Good One and the One who does good, who does good for us day after day: He has filled us, does fill us and will ever fill us with benevolence, grace, spirit, mercy and every good.