CHAPTER III
PUNISHMENT FOR PHARAOH'S STUBBORNNESS
(Exod 7:8–11:10)

Modern interpreters of the biblical story of the plagues in Egypt generally devote much attention to literary, form-critical, and traditio-historical problems. The recognized view is that the Exodus text is constructed from three sources: Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly.1 There are, however, cogent arguments against a monopoly of the exegetical field by source criticism, and some scholars prefer to concentrate on the final form of the text so as to focus more sharply on its theological meaning.2

What do the content and the stylistic devices of the narrative indicate in this context? The first point to note is that the introduction (7:8–13) and the conclusion (11:1–10) balance one another. The introduction shows Moses and Aaron, as God’s deputies, performing a wonder (mōpēt) before Pharaoh: Aaron’s rod turns into a snake. The court magicians match the performance, but Aaron’s rod swallows theirs. Pharaoh’s heart then hardens and he refuses to comply with Moses’ demand that the Israelites be released from

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Egypt. A similar hardening of heart is reported in the last two verses of the narrative (11:9–10).

The consequence of Pharaoh’s resistance to God results in Egypt being stricken with ten plagues, of which nine are grouped together in chapters 7–10, while the tenth stands apart in chapters 11–12. The description given indicates that the nine plagues can be divided into three groups of three plagues each. In each group, the first and second plagues occur only after Moses has served notice on Pharaoh, whereas the third plague follows without warning. In the case of the first, fourth and seventh plagues, Moses receives the divine command to appear before Pharaoh “in the morning.” It should also be noted that the first three plagues affect all the inhabitants, Egyptians and Israelites alike, while the other six strike only the Egyptians—thus emphasizing the difference between the two groups. A point of special importance is that the plagues become more terrible as the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart increases. Their effects persuade him several times to confess his guilt and to plead for God’s forbearance, but the change is transient: in the end, repeated signs and wonders do not persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites. It follows that God, for his part, has to set limits to his readiness to pardon Pharaoh’s guilt and to save him from perdition.

God’s repeated demands and Pharaoh’s failure to submit to them—even though he recognizes his fault—are the main (though not the only) unifying elements of the narrative. The inner unity of its themes is evidently the result of theological elaboration on original historical material as part of a systematic process of revision. An investigation of the text must, therefore, take account of continuing interaction between historical and theological truth; and this means that the literary-rhetorical devices of the biblical narrative have to be carefully considered.3

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