GENESIS I AND THE PLAGUES TRADITION IN PSALM CV

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Besides the Plagues narrative in Exod. vii-xii, Pss lxxviii and cv are the only two examples of a complete presentation of the Plagues in Egypt known to us. Ps. lxxviii and Ps. cv do not exactly correspond to the Pentateuchal traditions. Just by looking at the number of Plagues and their sequence in Pss lxxviii and cv, one may easily be led to conclude that they come from independent traditions.¹ But a closer look at these two psalms and the Pentateuch will reveal that they cannot be totally independent of the Pentateuchal traditions. Moreover, they represent stages in the traditio-historical development of the Plagues and each of them in turn reflects the historical-theological situations with which they are closely connected.

Many scholars consider that the tradition behind Ps. lxxviii belongs to the older J (E) stratum while Ps. cv is based on the P Plagues narrative. In Ps. lxxviii 43-52 seven Plagues are mentioned as compared to eight in Ps. cv and ten in the book of Exodus. This article will mainly be on Ps. cv, leaving Ps. lxxviii for another article. B. Margulis² has a detailed study of the Plagues tradition of Ps. cv, in which he is convinced that Ps. cv is based on the P tradition while Ps. lxxviii is independent of the P influence; probably, the J Stratum is preserved by Ps. lxxviii. But the question arises as to the absence of the sixth plague of Exod. ix 8-12 (P) and the transposition of the darkness plague to the beginning of the list in Ps. cv. In the Psalm Scroll of Qumran Cave II, Margulis finds that line 5 of Ps. cv 28-9 has more space than is required by the MT and the final word of line 4, ūm, cannot be reconciled with the MT. Therefore, he reconstructs the two lines and retranslates v. 29 as follows:

¹ A. Lauha, Die Geschichtsmotive in den alttestamentlichen Psalmen (Helsinki, 1945), pp. 53, 56.
line 4 [(v. 29) hpk ḥm myyhm ldm sm
5 [yrm lbʾwš wšk bdb r mqnm wmt ḥm (v. 30)
   3]rsh ṣm

v. 29 He turned the waters to blood
   He made their Nile stink
   He smote their livestock with dbr
   He caused their fish to die...

He then explains the omission of the plague of boils as due to the
dbr (v. 29) which destroyed all the Egyptian livestock (Exod. ix 6).
The psalmist ‘could retain the Exodus version of the hail only at
the price of consistency’.³ He transmuted the hail and deleted the
animal-affecting boils (Exod. ix 10) altogether in favour of con-
sistency.

Margulis is rightly criticized by Samuel E. Loewenstamm who
argues that, if the psalmist relying on the Pentateuch could take the
freedom of transferring the plague of darkness to the beginning of
the pericope, then he was ‘not concerned with a faithful reproduc-
tion of his allegedly authoritative source, the story of the plagues in
Exodus’.⁴ It is true that the established authority of the Pentateuch
did not stop the development of the Plagues tradition. Its remaining
fluid in the Second Temple period is seen in the Plagues narrative
in the Wisdom of Solomon. Furthermore, Margulis’s proposed
reconstruction violates the psalmist’s technique in presenting the
Plagues, which deals with all other plagues in at least two stichoi.
The insertion of dbr in v. 29 interrupts the plague of ‘‘water turning
to blood’’.

Compared with Exod. vii-xii, Ps. cv leaves out the fifth and sixth
plagues. Moreover, the ninth plague, darkness comes first in the
list in Ps. cv. A. F. Kirkpatrick explains the importance of the ninth
plague by pointing out that the plague of darkness was used chiefly
to attack the sun-god worship of the Egyptians.⁵ W. E. Barnes adds
that Yahweh is more than the sun-god since he creates light and
darkness (Isa. xlv 7). Darkness, according to Barnes, is the chief
sign of God’s displeasure.⁶ As recognized by Douglas A. Fox, the

³ p. 496. The boils plague (Exod. ix 8-12) is in a serious tension with Exod. ix
1-7 (murrain) and ix 13-35 (hail).
⁴ ‘‘The Number of Plagues in Psalm 105’’, Biblica 52 (1971), p. 35.
⁵ The Book of Psalms (Cambridge, 1902), p. 621.