

Article of the Month – April 2009

Power Encounters as Missionary Method – I – Exodus

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Alternating with our series of twelve missionary themes in Genesis we will look into some biblical examples of power encounters in areas of spiritual frontline battles.

Power encounters in the Bible – where the word does not occur, by the way – are God-initiated meetings between Himself and a lesser opposing power, posing itself as god. In such meetings God always wins: He is the Almighty. These meetings take place in time and space, but always at locations where God's Kingdom is about to push back the kingdom of darkness. That is where the theme of world missions surfaces.

So far it is exciting, but at the moment that human agents become God's chosen instruments to execute such power encounters – as is always the case – it may become a scary experience to them. At first, Moses undertook five attempts to escape the honor.¹

We learn about the episode of the Plagues that they represented judgments over the gods of Egypt.² At the start of the confrontation we see that Moses is sent to Pharaoh to stand before him as God.³ This is where we see the first large-scale, humanly-operated power-encounter take place. The people representing the enemy were Jannes and Jambres.⁴ They attempted to withstand Moses and Aaron four times.⁵ The Egyptian magicians imitated the miracles Moses performed three times, but from the fourth time onward they realized they were no match for the God of Israel.

The Plagues were each of a nature that attacked or ridiculed one or more of the Egyptian gods, thus proving their ungodliness in comparison with the only true God. On God's assignment, Moses arranged a conflict between the Divine and the devilish, between God and the gods.

In Egypt the river Nile was worshiped as the god of life and fertility. It was to this god that many little Hebrew boys were sacrificed. When God hit that god (his name was Hapi), the blood of these little ones had to surface.⁶ The water turned into blood (the *first* plague). The Egyptians also worshiped different sorts of fish, and because the Nile-god was hit, judgment came over these venerated fish as well, so that they died.

The *second* plague (frogs) attacked the goddess 'of the resurrection' Heka (or Heqet, who was pictured as frog) and thus also judged the worship of a part of nature.

Set, father of the gods in the Egyptian pantheistic assembly and protector of harvests, was hit in the *third* plague (gnats).

¹ Ex. 3:11,13; 4:1,10,13

² Ex. 12:12b

³ Ex. 7:1

⁴ 2 Tim. 3:8

⁵ Ex. 7:8-12, 17-22; 8:5-7, 16-19

⁶ Compare this thought with Gen. 4:10, where Abel's blood 'cried from the earth'

The *fourth* plague (flies) challenged the idolatrous belief that flies possessed reproductive and creation power. Therefore no one killed flies. Judgment was pronounced here over Beelzebub ('lord of the flies'). There are similarities with the Philistine god Baal-Zebub⁷ who was confronted by Elijah. In the NT he is called the prince of demons.⁸ These were quite some dark forces that Moses and later Elijah, were up against. It may not surprise us (given the similarities between the ministries of these two men) that we later see a similar duo appear as the Two Witnesses.⁹

The Egyptians worshiped quite a number of animals, and with the *fifth* plague (livestock pestilence) the bull-god Apis was judged.

For the *sixth* plague Moses, at God's order, threw a handful of ashes from a furnace into the air, which then settled on people's bodies as sores. That furnace was probably a place where human sacrifices were brought to the 'queen-mother-of-the-highest-heavens', Neit. By sacrificing humans the Egyptians must have thought that they could prevent further plagues.

The *seventh* plague (hail, thunder and fire) was directed against Shu, the god of the atmosphere and his colleagues Isis and Osiris. None of them was able to change the deplorable weather conditions.

The *eighth* plague judged the god Seraja, who was supposed to protect the country against locusts. The faith of the Egyptians must have been shaken severely, by seeing so many of their gods fail in their own 'field of expertise'.

The *ninth* plague (darkness) ridiculed the most important of them: Ra, the sun god. People may have wondered after three days, whether their god had died.

The *tenth* plague was not a judgment over a god; no culture knows of any that ultimately protects against death.

Pharaoh was venerated as god in Egypt, and as such was the main human opponent of Moses & Aaron in this struggle in the heavenlies. As usual the whole battle centered on worship.¹⁰ God demanded that His people would leave the place to worship Him. Pharaoh refused.¹¹ Four times he proposed a compromise¹² and so showed his rebellious attitude towards God. God never accepted any of Pharaoh's proposals: there is no way obstinate humans can negotiate with God.

Another aspect that draws our attention is that, to the degree that persecution increases,¹³ God's Self-revelation increases as well. In the next chapter God presents Himself four times as 'I AM' and speaks His word of power 'I will' eight times.¹⁴

It is remarkable that Pharaoh hardened his heart five times¹⁵ before God hardened it three times,¹⁶ thus confirming him in his deliberate and consistent choices. This is an obvious blow in the face of the 'predestination-unto-damnation' proponents. God is never unfair, not even against His fiercest enemy, by pre-determining their demise. In fact, Pharaoh could even have saved his life, had he not decided on one last act of warfare against the Israelites – in which he drowned with his army.

⁷ 2 Kings 1:2

⁸ Matt. 12:24

⁹ Rev. 11:3-12

¹⁰ Ex. 5:1; 8:1; 9:1,13; 10:3

¹¹ In fact Pharaoh demanded the 'worship' of the slaves for himself. Fear, slavery and imprisonment are negative forms of worship, because it forces the attention of the subjects on the oppressor, who leaves them no freedom to worship any other God.

¹² Ex. 8:25 ('here'), 28 ('not far'); 10:11 ('only the men'), 24 ('without flocks and herds')

¹³ Ex. 5:5-9

¹⁴ Ex. 6:1-8

¹⁵ Ex. 7:13,22; 8:15,19,32

¹⁶ Ex. 9:12; 10:1,20