

The Reception History of the Ten Plagues  
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Class 2: The Ten Plagues in Greek, Roman, and Christian Imagination  
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## I. Early Greek and Roman Writings on the Jews

### 1. Lysimachus

Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.304–311:

His account is this: In the reign of Bocchoris, king of Egypt, the Jewish people, who were afflicted with leprosy, scurvy, and other maladies, took refuge in the temples and lived a mendicant existence. The victims of disease being very numerous, a dearth ensued throughout Egypt. King Bocchoris thereupon sent to consult the oracle of Ammon about the failure of crops. The god told him to purify the temples of impure and impious persons, to drive them out of these sanctuaries into the wilderness, to drown those afflicted with leprosy and scurvy, as the sun was indignant that such persons should live, and to purify the temples; then the land would yield her increase. On receiving these oracular instructions, Bocchoris summoned the priests and servitors at the altars, and ordered them to draw up a list of the unclean persons and to deliver them into military charge to be conducted into the wilderness and to pack the lepers into sheets of lead and sink them in the ocean. The lepers and victims of scurvy having been drowned, the others were collected and exposed in the desert to perish.... On the next day a certain Moses advised them to take their courage in their hands and make a straight track until they reached inhabited country, instructing them to show goodwill to no man, to offer not the best but the worst advice, and to overthrow any temples and altars to the gods which they found. The rest assenting, they proceeded to put these decisions into practice....they maltreated the population, and plundered and set fire to the temples, until they came to the country now called Judaea, where they built a city in which they settled. This town was called Hierosyla because of their sacrilegious propensities.

### 2. Apion

Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.1–11:

In the first volume of this work, my most esteemed Epaphroditus, I demonstrated the antiquity of our race, corroborating my statements by the writings of Phoenicians, Chaldaeans, and Egyptians, besides citing as witnesses numerous Greek historians; I also challenged the statements of Manetho, Chaeremon, and some others. I shall now proceed to refuse the rest of the authors who have attacked us. I am doubtful, indeed, whether the shameless remarks of Apion the grammarian deserve serious refutation. Some of these resemble the allegations made by others, some are very indifferent additions of his own; most of them are pure buffoonery, and, to tell the truth, display the gross ignorance of their author, a man of low character and a charlatan to the end of his days. Yet, since most people are so foolish as to find greater attraction in such compositions than in works of a serious nature, to be charmed by abuse and impatient of praise, I think it incumbent upon me not to pass over without examination even this author, who has written an indictment of us formal enough for a court of law. For I observe, on the other hand, that people in general also have a habit of being intensely delighted when one who has been the first to malign another has his own vices brought home to him. His argument is difficult to summarize and his meaning

to grasp. But, so far as the extreme disorder and confusion of his lying statements admit of analysis, one may say that some fall into the same category as those already investigated, relating to the departure of our ancestors from Egypt; others form an indictment of the Jewish residents in Alexandria; while a third class. Mixed up with the rest, consists of accusations against our temple rites and our ordinances in general.

That our ancestors neither were Egyptians by race nor were expelled from that country in consequence of contagious diseases or any similar affliction, I think I have already given not merely sufficient, but even super-abundant, proof. I propose, however, briefly to mention the details added by Apion. In the third book of his History of Egypt he makes the following statement: “Moses, I have heard from old people in Egypt, was a native of Heliopolis, who, being pledged to the customs of his country, erected prayer-houses, open to the air, in the various precincts of the city, all facing eastwards; such being the orientation also of Heliopolis. In place of obelisks he set up pillars, beneath which was a model of a boat; and the shadow cast on this basin by the statue described a circle corresponding to the course of the sun in the heavens...”

Josephus, Against Apion, 2.15–17:

Apion...precisely dates the exodus in the seventh Olympiad, and in the first year of that Olympiad, the year in which, according to him, the Phoenicians founded Carthage...

After stating that the fugitives numbered 110,000, in which imaginary figures he agrees with Lysimachus, he gives an astonishing and implausible explanation of the etymology of the word “sabbat!” “After a six days’ march,” he says, “they developed tumours in the groin, and that was why, after safely reaching the country now called Judaea, they rested on the seventh day, and called that day sabbaton, preserving the Egyptian terminology; for disease of the groin in Egypt is called sabbatosis.

This astonishing Apion, after stating that they reached Judaea in six days tells us elsewhere that Moses went up into the mountain called Sinai, which lies between Egypt and Arabia, remained in concealment there for forty days, and then descended and gave the Jews their laws...

Such are some of the novel features which the Egyptian Apion, improving upon other authors, has introduced into the story of Moses and the departure of the Jews from Egypt.

Josephus, Against Apion, 2.79–96:

Yet to high-minded men nothing is more disgraceful than a lie, or any description, but above all on the subject of a temple of world-wide fame and commanding sanctity. Within this sanctuary Apion has the effrontery to assert that the Jews kept an ass’s head, worshipped that animal and deeming it worthy of the deepest reverence; the fact was disclosed, he maintains, on the occasion of the spoliation of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes, when the head, made of gold and worth a high price, was discovered...

[A man whom Antiochus found in the Jerusalem Temple] was a Greek and that, while travelling about the province for a livelihood, he was suddenly kidnapped by men of a foreign race and conveyed to the temple; there he was shut up and seen by nobody, but was fattened on feasts of the most lavish description. At first these unlooked for attentions deceived him and caused him pleasure; suspicion followed, then consternation. Finally, on consulting the attendants who waited upon him, he heard of the unutterable law of the Jews, for the sake of which he was being fed. The practice was repeated annually at a fixed season. They would kidnap a Greek foreigner, fatten him for a year, and then convey him to a wood, where they slew him, sacrificed his body with their customary ritual, partook of his flesh, and while immolating the Greek, swore an oath of hostility to the Greeks. The remains of their victim were then thrown into a pit.

## II. Early Christian Writings on the Jews

### 1. Acts 7:1–43:

Then the high priest asked him, “Are these things so?” And Stephen replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.’ Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living. He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child. And God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and mistreat them during four hundred years. ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.

“The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favor and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there on their first visit. On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five in all; so Jacob went down to Egypt. He himself died there as well as our ancestors, and their bodies were brought back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

“But as the time drew near for the fulfillment of the promise that God had made to Abraham, our people in Egypt increased and multiplied until another king who had not known Joseph ruled over Egypt. He dealt craftily with our race and forced our ancestors to abandon their infants so that they would die. At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful before God. For three months he was brought up in his father’s house; and when he was abandoned, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.

“When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his relatives, the Israelites. When he saw one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. He supposed that his kinsfolk would understand that God through him was rescuing them, but they did not understand. The next day he came to some of them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you wrong each other?’ But the man who was wronging his neighbor pushed Moses aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ When he heard this, Moses fled and became a resident alien in the land of Midian. There he became the father of two sons.

“Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush. When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight; and as he approached to look, there came the voice of the Lord: ‘I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the mistreatment

of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt.’

“It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.’ He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living oracles to give to us. Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make gods for us who will lead the way for us; as for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ At that time they made a calf, offered a sacrifice to the idol, and reveled in the works of their hands. But God turned away from them and handed them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: ‘Did you offer to me slain victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? No; you took along the tent of Moloch, and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; so I will remove you beyond Babylon.’

## **2. Letter to the Hebrews**

3:12–19: Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. <sup>13</sup>But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’, so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. As it is said, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.’ Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? <sup>17</sup>But with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? <sup>18</sup>And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? <sup>19</sup>So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

8:6–13: But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. <sup>7</sup>For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one. God finds fault with them when he says: ‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord”, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.’ In speaking of ‘a new covenant’, he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.

## **3. Revelation 11:1–14:**

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, ‘Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, <sup>2</sup>but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. <sup>3</sup>And I will

grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, wearing sackcloth.’

These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. <sup>5</sup>And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner. <sup>6</sup>They have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.

When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, <sup>8</sup>and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. <sup>9</sup>For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; <sup>10</sup>and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.

But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and those who saw them were terrified. <sup>12</sup>Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here!’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them. <sup>13</sup>At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second woe has passed. The third woe is coming very soon.

Cf. Revelation 16:21

#### **4. Ambrose of Milan, 397**

You wrote to me that you were disturbed by what you read: “Let us sacrifice the abominations of the Egyptians to God.” But you had the means to explain it: that in Genesis it is written, “The Egyptians abominated the shepherd of flocks.” This was certainly not because of the man, but because of the sheep. For the Egyptians cultivated the earth with the plow; Abraham and Jacob, however, and later Moses and David, were shepherds and bestowed a certain royal discipline upon this occupation. Thus the Egyptians hated pure sacrifices, that is, zeal complete and perfect for virtue and discipline. For what wicked men hate is pure and pious among good men. The indulgent man hates the labor of virtue; the glutton shrinks back from it. And so the Egyptian body, because it loves allurements, turns away from the virtues of the soul. It hates authority, and shrinks from the discipline of the virtues and all labors of this sort. The Egyptian, then flees these things; he is an Egyptian and not a man. You have knowledge of human nature; you will understand this. But reject what they follow and choose, since these two—prudence and folly—cannot be in accord with one another. And so, just as the virtues of prudence and continence exclude whatever belongs in any way to imprudence and intemperance, so every foolish man and every incontinent man has no part in what good men have or in the inheritance of the wise and continent man.

#### **5. Augustine of Hippo, 430**

For what reason do you puff yourself up with human pride? A man insulted you, and you swelled up and were angered. Rid yourself of the fleas that you may sleep. Find out who you are! For that you may know, brothers, that these things which would bother us were created to enable us to control our pride, [remember], God could have tamed the proud people of Pharaoh with bears, with lions or with snakes; he sent flies and frogs upon them that their pride might be tamed by the most ignoble of things.

## 6. Isodore of Seville, 636:

Then the plagues are visited upon Egypt. They were carried out corporally among the Egyptians; they are now carried out spiritually in us, for Egypt is the figure of this world. The first plague is the one in which the waters are turned into blood. The waters of Egypt are erratic, just as the dogmas of the philosophers are inconstant. These waters are deservedly turned into blood, because when the philosophers ponder the causes of things they think carnally. But when the cross of Christ shows the light of truth to this world, it will reproach the world with censures of this sort, so that from the kind of punishment it suffers, the world might recognize its errors.

In the second plague frogs are brought forth. They are thought to stand figuratively for the songs of the poets. The poets have brought deceptive fables into this world, with their empty and conceited songs that are like the croaking of frogs. For the frog stands for empty loquacity. That animal is good for nothing else but to give out the sounds of its voice in offensive and annoying noises.

After these plagues, gnats are brought forth. This animal flies through the air suspended on wings. But it is so subtle and minute that it escapes being seen by the eye unless one looks closely. But when it lands on the body it drills in with a sharp sting. If anyone cannot see it flying, he still feels its sting immediately. This sort of animal can be compared with the subtlety of heretics, who drill into souls with the subtle stings of their words. They attack with such cunning that one who is deceived neither sees nor understands the source of his deception. At the third sign the magicians yielded and said, "The finger of God is here." Those magicians stand for heretics and their animosity. The apostle states this when he says, "Just as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so too these men resisted the truth. They are corrupt in mind and reprobate in matters of faith. But they will not advance any further. Their madness will be manifested to everyone, just as Jannes' and Jambres' was." The minds of the Egyptian magicians were disquieted by their own corruption, and their power failed at the third sign. They confessed that the Holy Spirit was against them, for the Spirit was in Moses. The Holy Spirit is put in the third place, and he is the finger of God. Thus the magicians failed at the third sign and said, "The finger of God is here." The Holy Spirit, well disposed and favorable, gives rest to the meek and humble of heart but, when he is opposed, stirs up disquiet against the merciless and the proud. Those tiny gnats signified this disquiet, at which Pharaoh's magicians failed and said, "The finger of God is here."

Questions on the Old Testament, Exodus

## III. Rabbinic Associations

### Between Plague and Christianity:

#### 1. B. Sanhedrin 103a

ואמר רב חסדא אמר רבי ירמיה בר אבא מאי דכתיב (תהלים צא, י) לא תאונה אליך רעה ונגע לא יקרב באהלך לא תאונה אליך רעה שלא ישלוט) בהן יצר הרע ונגע לא יקרב באהלך שלא תמצא אשתך ספק גדה בשעה שתבא מן הדרך

דבר אחר לא תאונה אליך רעה שלא יבעתוך חלומות רעים והרהורים רעים ונגע לא יקרב באהלך שלא יהא לך בן או תלמיד שמקדיה תבשילו ברבים [כגון ישו הנוצרי]

And Rav Ḥisda says that Rabbi Yirmeya bar Abba says: What is the meaning of that which is written: “No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your tent”(Psalms 91:10)? ...

Alternatively, the phrase “no evil shall befall you” means that you will be frightened neither by bad dreams nor by evil thoughts. “Nor shall any plague come near your tent” means that you will not have a child or student who overcooks his food in public, i.e., sins in public and causes others to sin, such as in the well-known case of Jesus the Nazarene.<sup>1</sup>

## Between an Ass and Christianity:

### 2. B. Shabbat 116a–b

אימא שלום, דביתהו דרבי אליעזר, אסתיה דרבן גמליאל הווי. הנה הווי פילוספא בשבבותיה

דהנה שקיל שמה דלא מקבל שוחדא. בעו לאחוכי ביה. עיילא ליה שרגא דדחבא, נאזול לקמיה. אמרה ליה: בעינא דניפלגו לי בנכסי דבי נשי. אמר להו: פלוגו. אמר ליה, וקתיב לן: במקום ברא, ברמא לא תירות. אמר ליה: מן יומא דגליתון מארעכון, איתנטילת אורייתא דמשה ואיתיהיבת עוון גליון, וקתיב ביה: ברא וברמא פחדא ירתיון.

למחר הדר עייל ליה איהו חמרא לובא. אמר להו: שפילית לסיפיה דעוון גליון, וקתיב ביה: אגא לא למיפחת מן אורייתא דמשה איתי [ולא] לאוספי על אורייתא דמשה איתי, וקתיב ביה: במקום ברא — ברמא לא תירות. אמרה ליה: נהור נהוריך כשרגא. אמר ליה רבן גמליאל: אתא חמרא ובטש לשרגא

The Gemara relates:

Imma Shalom, the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, was Rabban Gamliel’s sister. There was a Christian philosopher [*pilosoph*] in their neighborhood who disseminated about himself the reputation that he does not accept bribes. They wanted to mock him and reveal his true nature. She privately gave him a golden lamp, and she and her brother came before him, approaching him as if they were seeking judgment. She said to the philosopher: I want to share in the inheritance of my father’s estate. He said to them: Divide it. Rabban Gamliel said to him: It is written in our Torah: In a situation where there is a son, the daughter does not inherit. The philosopher said to him: Since the day you were exiled from your land, the Torah of Moses was taken away and the *avon gilyon* was given in its place. It is written in the *avon gilyon*: A son and a daughter shall inherit alike.

The next day Rabban Gamliel brought the philosopher a Libyan donkey. Afterward, Rabban Gamliel and his sister came before the philosopher for a judgment. He said to them: I proceeded to the end of the *avon*

<sup>1</sup> “The clue to this figurative meaning is given in the Talmud itself, b. Berach. 34a. The Gemara in this place is commenting on the following words of the Mishnah: “He who says “The good shall bless thee,” lo, this is the way of heresy. He who goes before the Ark, if he makes a mistake, another shall go in his stead, and let there be no refusal at such a time.” To ‘go before the Ark’ is to stand at the lectern to recite the prayers in the Synagogue. And the Mishnah has just remarked that some liturgical phrases are signs of heresy in the reader. Therefore the Mishnah directs what is to be done when a reader makes a mistake. Another man is to take his place and there must be no refusal on the part of the second man. That is the Mishnah. The Gemara says: “Our Rabbis have taught ‘He who goes before the Ark ought [at first] to refuse. He who does not refuse is like food without salt. He who refuses to must is like food of which the salt has burnt (or spoiled it.’ The meaning of this is clear. One who refuses too much is *open to the suspicion of heresy*, and he is like food that is spoiled or burned by too much salt.” A. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash, Augmented Edition* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007) 59–60.

*gilayon*, and it is written: I, *avon gilayon*, did not come to subtract from the Torah of Moses, and I did not come to add to the Torah of Moses. And it is written there: In a situation where there is a son, the daughter does not inherit. She said to him: May your light shine like a lamp, alluding to the lamp she had given him. Rabban Gamliel said to him: The donkey came and kicked the lamp, thereby revealing the entire episode.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Trans. A. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash, Augmented Edition* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2007) 146–148