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Locusts – Eco-narrativities in Exodus 10:1–20

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Abstract

The episodes of the ten signs and/or the prodigies in the Exodus narrative (Exod 7:14–11:10) put forward a set of literary images confronting the reader with environmental disasters. This investigation focuses on the account of the locust proliferation (Exod 10:1–20). Three items will receive specific attention: (a) How does the biblical text describe what happens in nature? (b) Are there human causes of this disaster? For example, do political decisions have an impact on the environment? (c) What does the account of the locust sign reveal about God? With this discussion, I hope to show that biblical literature can enrich the construction of biblical ecotheology and current efforts to safeguard the environment.

Keywords

Locusts; environmental disaster; Bible and ecology; green reading

1. Introduction

The narrative cycle of the ten signs and/or prodigies in the book of Exodus brings a series of environmental catastrophes before the audience. In the first seven episodes, the reader is invited to contemplate the degeneration of the waters in Egypt, with the death of fish (Exod 7:14–25), the disastrous proliferation of frogs (Exod 7:26–8:11), gnats (Exod 8:12–15) and flies (Exod 8:16–28), an animal pestilence which affects horses, donkeys, camels, herds and flocks (Exod 9:1–7), air pollution with soot, which causes skin diseases for humans and animals (Exod 9:8–12), and a climatic catastrophe (Exod 9:13–37).[1] After these dramatic events, the Exodus narrative comes to the

1 I recently wrote about some of these episodes in other research articles, published in Portuguese: "Econarratividades exodais: A praga das rãs em Ex 7:26–8,11" (Grenzer 2022); "Aprendizados com a catástrofe climática (Ex 9:13–35)" (Grenzer 2022); "A morte

eighth disaster of the locusts (Exod 10:1–20), the episode on which this investigation will focus.[2]

The book of Exodus usually receives little attention in discussions of the Bible and the environment or in "green" readings of this literary tradition. For example, in *The Oxford Handbook of The Bible and Ecology* (Marlow & Harris 2022), which focuses on the books of the Pentateuch, Exodus and Numbers are absent. In contrast, I hope to show that these two writings offer rich and unique reflections on the socio-environmental dimensions of life in this world. In particular, two aspects of this account are striking. When narrating the Israelites´ stay in Egypt (Exod 1:1–13:17), the book of Exodus seems to imagine that, in the face of the repeated failures of the political negotiations about the freedom of the oppressed, the oppressive power finds itself exposed to the forces of nature. By narrating, in turn, the departure of the Israelites from Egypt and the desert crossing (Exod 13:17–Num 21:20), the biblical story highlights how nature becomes transparent to the favourable action of God for those who walk towards freedom, even in spaces normally hostile to human beings.

However, before considering the broader meaning of a biblical book in its entirety, we must read and investigate it closely, passage by passage. Here, I will offer a close reading of Exodus 10:1–20. I will consider the narrative synchronously because the poetic and thematic configuration has resulted in a well-unified work of art. Though some commentators observe tensions or inconsistencies in the final text (Schmidt, 1990:35–45), these observations cannot be corroborated. The whole book of Exodus as well as the entire Pentateuch as we read them today both appear to be literary works constructed poetically and with surprising literary uniformity (Markl 2022:187–196). Of course, there was textual prehistory, but "the early forms or the development up to the final version of the book cannot longer be recognized with certainty with today´s tools of exegesis" (Fischer & Markl 2009:24).

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do gado: Econarratividades em Ex 9:1–7" (Grenzer, 2023); "Fuligem: Econarratividades em Ex 9:8–12" (Grenzer 2023).

2 The present investigation is the result of my research stay at the University of Notre Dame, United States, in February 2023. I thank my colleague Gary A. Anderson for the discussions that enriched this study, and Gabriel Parlin for the language editing of this article.

As previously stated, the focus of this study is on eco-narrativities. Therefore, the investigation is aimed at the question of how the biblical narrative in Exodus 10:1–20 covers the complexity of life (flora and fauna) and the factors that determine it (water, air, soil, and heat), without defending a violent domination of the human being over nature but insisting on a harmonious coexistence. In this sense, I will consider not only how humans manage to provoke an environmental catastrophe but also how they are "morally responsible for alleviating the crisis" (Simkins 1994:259). Finally, I will argue that the biblical text seems to imply that nature, in different circumstances, transmits the word of God to humans. Even relatively small insects, such as locusts, can convey a divine message.

2. The biblical narrative

The Exodus narrative was originally composed in Hebrew. There are some fragments of Exod 10:1–20 among the texts discovered at Qumran (Ulrich 2010:50–53). These fragments provide "the reader with the oldest and most authentic witnesses to the text of the Scriptures as they circulated in Jerusalem and surrounding regions toward the end of the Second Temple period" (Ulrich 2010: IX). The first complete Hebrew text of Exodus 10:1–20, however, is found in the *Leningrad Codex*, a copy from 1008 CE. The critical edition of the Hebrew Bible which I am using here (Elliger & Rudolph 2007) follows this medieval manuscript. My translation of the narrative in Exodus 10:1–20 tries to be literal and, hopefully, conserves the metaphorical images and the important parallelism present in the Hebrew text.

> (1a) Then the Lord said to Moses, (1b) "Go to Pharaoh, (1c) because I have made heavy his heart and the heart of his servants, (1d) so that I may perform these signs of Mine among them (2a) and so that you may tell in the ears of your son and the son of your son (2c) what I have provoked in Egypt, (2d) and the signs that I have performed among them. (2e) And you will know that I am the Lord".
>
> (3a) So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh, (3b) and said to him, (3c) "Thus said the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, (3d) 'How long? (3e) You have refused to humble yourself before Me. (3f) Send My people away, (3g) so that they may serve Me. (4a) For if you refuse to send

My people away, (4b) behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your territory. (5a) It will cover the surface of the land, (5b) so that no one will be able to see the land. (5c) And it will devour the rest of what has escaped, of what has been left to you from the hail. (5d) It will devour every tree which sprouts for you in the field. (6a) They will fill your houses, the houses of all your servants and the houses of all the Egyptians, (6b) something that neither your fathers nor the fathers of your fathers have seen, from the day they have been on the soil until this day.'" (6c) And he turned (6d) and went out from Pharaoh.

(7a) Pharaoh´s servants said to him, (7b) "How long will this one be a snare to us? (7c) Send the men away, (7d) so that they may serve the Lord their God. (7e) Do you not yet know (7f) that Egypt was destroyed?" (8a) So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh, (8b) and he said to them, (8c) "Go, (8d) serve the Lord your God! (8e) Who are the ones that will go?" (9a) Moses said, (9b) "We shall go with our young and our old; (9c) with our sons and our daughters, with our flocks and our herds we shall go, (9d) because it will be a feast to the Lord." (10a) Then he said to them, (10b) "So may the Lord be with you (10c) when I send you and the ones of short steps away! (10d) See, (10e) evil is before your face! (11a) Not so! (11b) Go please the males, (11c) and serve the Lord, (11d) since that is what you are searching for!" (11e) And someone expels them from the face of Pharaoh.

(12a) Then the Lord said to Moses, (12b) "Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, (12c) so that it may climb up on the land of Egypt (12d) and devour every herb of the land, (12e) everything that the hail has leftover". (13a) And Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt. (13b) The Lord directed an east wind on the land all that day and all the night. (13c) And when It was morning, (13d) he carried the locusts through the east wind. (14a) The locusts climbed up on all the land of Egypt (14b) and settled in all the territory of Egypt. (14c) It was very heavy. (14d) Before this it never has had locusts like that, (14e) and after it nor would be thus. (15a) It covered the surface of all the land, (15b) so that the land grew dark. (15c) And it devoured every herb of the land and all tree fruit

(15d) that the hail had left over. (15e) And, in all the land of Egypt, nothing green was left behind on a tree or as field herb.

(16a) Then the Pharaoh hurried to call for Moses and Aaron. (16b) He said, (16c) "I have sinned against the Lord your God and you. (17a) And now please carry my sin only this once, (17b) and pray to the Lord your God (17c) so that he only may remove this death from upon me." (18a) So he went out from Pharaoh (18b) and prayed to the Lord.

(19a) And the Lord turned up a very strong seaside wind. (19b) It carried away the locusts, (19c) and blew it towards the Sea of Reeds. (19d) Not one of the locusts was left in all the territory of Egypt. (20a) And the Lord made the heart of Pharaoh strong, (20b) but he did not send the sons of Israel away.

3. The environment

Interpreters of the episodes that constitute the cycle of narratives in Exodus 7:14–11:10 usually pay little attention to the natural phenomena which are experienced by humans as sudden plagues. In this narrative, the "locust" (vv. 4b, 12b, 13d, 14a.d, 19b.d), mentioned here seven times, becomes a central character. The number seven, used as a stylistic element, carries with it the connotation of wholeness and/or fullness. Supporting this impression, the Hebrew word translated as "locust" itself reminds the reader of the book of Exodus of that aspect. The name of the animal makes the reader hear the verbal roots "to become many/much" (see Exod 1:7, 10, 12, 20; 7:3; 11:9; 16:17, 18; 30:15; 32:13; 36,5, and Exod 23:29), and other words derived from it confirm this impression (see the adjective "many" in Exod 1:9; 2:23; 5:5; 9:28; 12,38; 19:21; 23:2[2x]; 34:6, and the substantive "multitude" in Exod 15:7). Thus, the word "locust" immediately makes one think of proliferation.

Between almost a hundred mentions of an insect or another arthropodean animal in the Hebrew Bible (Kritsky 1997:183), the locust is "by far the most important insect in the Bible" (France 1986:105), since there are "many names for it, although the etymology of them is not always clear" (Riede 2002:195). Following the classification in Deysel's study of animal

names and categorisation in the Hebrew Bible (2017:113–114), there are nine nouns commonly translated as locust which are mentioned a total of sixty two times in the Hebrew Bible: the "locust" that multiplies a lot (Exod 10:4, 12, 13, 14[2x], 19[2x]; Lev 11:22; Deut 28:38; Judg 6:5; 7:12; 1 Kgs 8:37; 2 Chron 6:28; Job 39:20; Pss 78:46; 105:34; 109:23; Prov 30:27; Jer 46:23; Joel 1:4[2x]; 2:25; Nah 3:15, 17), the locust as "hopper" (Ps 105:34; Jer 51:14, 27; Joel 1:4[2x]; 2:25; Nah 3:15[2x], 16), the locust as "destroyer" (Ps 78:46; 2 Chron 6:28; 1 Kgs 8:37; Isa 33:4; Joel 1:4; 2:25), the locust as "grasshopper" (Lev 11:22; Num 13:33; 2 Chr 7:13; Ezra 2:46; Eccl 12:5; Isa 40:22), the locust as "cutter" (Joel 1:4; 2:25; Amos 4:9), the locust as "whirrer" (Deut 28:42; Isa 18:1), the "katydid" (Lev 11:22), the "cricket" (Lev 11:22) and the "flying" locust (Amos 7:1; Nah 3:17) or the locust that forms a "swarm" (1 Kgs 6:9; 2 Kgs 3:16[2x]; Isa 33:4; Jer 14:3 and 2 Sam 21:18, 19; Nah 3:17).

However, Exodus 10:1–20 always uses the same noun for the insect. In addition to the sevenfold repetition, other details enhance the presence of the "locust" (vv. 4, 12, 13, 14[2x], 19[2x]). It is said that it is "very heavy" (v. 14c), recalling the "heavy swarm of flies" (Exod 8:20) of the third environmental disaster, the "heavy pestilence" (Exod 9:3) that hit the cattle during the fifth catastrophe, and the "very heavy hail" (Exod 9:18, 24) of the climate catastrophe, the seventh sign sent to the ruler of Egypt. At the same time, the heaviness of the locusts mirrors the "heavy heart" (Exod 7:14) of the one who is governing the country in the Nile River valley, with it being explicit that is "the LORD who has made heavy the heart" of pharaoh "and his servants" (v. 1c). Again, a phenomenon amid nature invites the reader to reflect and/or meditate on human beings and God.

Another detail of the locusts' description is striking, namely the several descriptions of the eating behaviour of these insects. The insects now "devour the rest of what has escaped or of what has been left from the hail" (v. 5c, 12d-e, 15d), the previous ecological disaster. In other words, "every tree which sprouts in the field" (v. 5d), "every herb of the land" (v. 12d, 15c), and "all tree fruit" (v. 15c) are eaten by the locusts. And once more, it is repeated that "in all the land of Egypt, nothing green is left behind on a tree or as field herb" (v. 15e). All vegetation is affected, including both woody and herbaceous plants. As a result, all plant food for animals and humans – grass, grains, vegetables, fruits – is destroyed. This means hunger and death because animals and humanity depend on flora and

what it provides for both. Given this, it is even ironic that the Israelites will leave Egypt with their "flocks and herds" (v. 9c) while "the houses" of the pharaoh and "the houses of all his servants and the houses of all the Egyptians are filled" with locusts (v. 6a). Although in the culture of biblical Israel it is permissible to eat "locusts" (Lev 11:22), "the absoluteness of devastation" (Fretheim 1991a:391) wrought by these insects will cause a very severe famine.

Geography, climatic conditions, and the course of day and night are other subjects mentioned in Exodus 10:1–20. An "east wind" (v. 13b–c) hits "the land all that day and all the night" (v. 13b)," (v. 13b), "carrying the locusts when it is morning" (v. 13c–d). Later, a "strong seaside wind is turned up" (v. 19a), carrying away the locusts" (v. 19b) "and blowing them towards the Sea of Reeds" (v. 19c). The biblical narrative in question makes a more accurate understanding of this passage difficult. The "Sea of Reeds" (v. 19c) is located east of Egypt and, probably, must be identified with the Great Bitter Lake rather than with the Red Sea as the Septuagint translation does. But where does the "strong seaside wind" (v. 19a) come from? Would it be "a storm coming from the Mediterranean" (Sarna 1986:72)? Probably not, because "a wind blowing from the north would not drive the locusts towards the Sea of Reeds, but towards the desert in the south, where is no sea" (Andiñach 2010:144). Perhaps the biblical text has the geography of Israel in mind, where the seaside wind comes from the western Mediterranean. However, more important for my reading is to understand how the narrative observes the relationships between climatic phenomena, on the one hand, and the life of flora and fauna, on the other. So, it is right to imagine that "the humid climate caused by the hailstorm", narrated in the previous episode (Exod 9:13–35), "favoured the proliferation of the insects" (Fischer & Markl 2009:118). "During the rainless periods, the locusts exist in a solitarious phase as isolated individuals", and "reproduction begins when the female finds appropriate soil conditions" (Gilbert 2002:40–41). After the embedding of the eggs, the emerging of the young hoppers, and the five moulting stages, "the adult emerges with wings that enable it to fly substantial distances" (Gilbert 2002:40–41). Now the wind becomes important. And this is the point highlighted in the biblical narrative studied here. The "wind" (vv. 13b–c.19a) is seen as the cause both of the

presence and removal of the locusts. Together with this experience, the question remains of what the wind can teach the reader about life and God.

A final detail in the depiction of the environment in this passage is worth noting. Exodus 10:1–20 also highlights the magnitude and/or uniqueness of the disaster. "The locusts in the territory" (v. 4b) governed by Pharaoh "cover the surface of the land" (v. 5a), "so that no one will be able to see the land" (v. 5b). It is something that has "never been seen neither by the fathers nor by the fathers of the fathers since the day they are on the soil" (v. 6b). That is, "the locusts climb up on all the land of Egypt" (v. 14a) "and settle in the territory of Egypt" (v. 14b), in the sense that "before this it never has had locusts like that, and after it nor would be thus" (v. 14d–e). In other words, unprecedented swarms "cover the surface of all the land" (v. 15a), "so that the land grows dark" (v. 15b), foretelling the coming disaster of "darkness" (Exod 10,21[2x], 22), one of "the constitutive elements of the chaos" (Houtman 1996:111). Events like these in the middle of nature are eye-catching. Normally, they challenge people in their attempt to survive and understand reality. Is this, in turn, also valid for those who govern?

4. Political decisions

The Exodus narrative is concerned with the socio-environmental dimensions of reality. The ancient texts seem to detect how much human behaviour can affect nature. This applies, par excellence, to the decisions of those who govern. How does this, concretely, gain visibility in Exodus 10:1–20?

The "Pharaoh" (vv. 1b, 3a, 6d, 7a, 8a, 11e, 16a, 18a, 20a) is mentioned nine times in this episode, and "his servants" or "officials" (vv. 1c, 6a, 7a) appear three times. Observing that the latter have access to Pharaoh and even dialogue critically with him, it is reasonable to conclude that they are part of the palace and the government. Therefore, together, Pharaoh and his servants receive twelve mentions, a highly symbolic number. "Egypt" or the "Egyptians" (vv. 2b, 6a, 7f, 12b–c, 13a, 14a–b, 15e, 19d) are mentioned ten times. The king of Egypt is confronted with demands regarding those he oppresses three times, twice by Moses (vv. 3c–6b, 9b–d) and once by his servants (vv. 7b–f). But the Pharaoh also speaks three times (vv. 8c–e,

10b–11d, 16c–17c). This balance in terms of the number of discourses seems to mark a political stalemate.

First, Pharaoh is addressed by Moses, accompanied by Aaron (vv. 3c–6b). Prophetically, he demands that the Egyptian governor release the Hebrews oppressed by him. This is the order formulated by Moses: "Send my people away!" (v. 3f; Exod 5:1; 7:16, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13). However, postures such as "deceitful dealings" (Exod8:25), "haughtiness" (Exod 9:17), and "refusal" (v. 3e, 4a; Exod 7:14, 27; 9:2) have prevailed until now in the king of Egypt. Therefore, one can understand the question Moses now presents to Pharaoh, "How long?" (v. 3d). And the accusation too: "You have refused to humble yourself" (v. 3e). That means that, concerning Moses, "the emphasis of his address is on the continued resistance of Pharaoh" (Dozeman 2009:242). There remains, however, the hope that some extraordinary surprising and even disastrous events may change the behaviour of those who govern. Thus, the Hebrew prophet announces to Pharaoh the plague of the locusts (vv. 4b–6b).

Soon after Moses' departure (v. 6c–d), which goes unanswered, "Pharaoh´s officials address him with a similar horrified accusation" (Janzen 2000:128). They ask the same question to the governor as Moses, "How long?" (v. 7b). And they resubmit the Mosaic command to Pharaoh, "Send the men away!" (v. 7c). After the first seven environmental catastrophes (Exod 7:14–9:35), the decisive argument for them is already the "destruction of Egypt" (v. 7f)., Pharaoh´s servants, to some extent, are more aware of the situation in the country than the one they serve.

The pressure from Pharaoh´s officials provokes the governor to meet again with the two representatives of the Hebrew people. This time, a dialogue ensues between the king of Egypt and Moses (vv. 8–11). Initially, Pharaoh seemed willing to allow the Hebrews to leave. His order is, "Go!" (v. 8c). In truth, however, the oppressor "is less willing to let Israel go than before", and "his response stands in basic disagreement with his servants" (Fretheim 1991b:127). Therefore, the governor seeks to impose his conditions for the departure of those oppressed by him. Only "the males can go" (v. 11b), to celebrate a "feast" (v. 9d) to their God. Those with "short steps" (v. 10c) – women, children, the elderly, and cattle (v. 9b–c) – must stay behind so that the men will return. Though he offers a politically correct proposal,

allowing the Hebrews to leave following the requests of Moses and his servants, Pharaoh sarcastically opposes the exodus dynamic. The freedom of the oppressed is not achieved through political negotiations.

Instead of meeting the demands of Moses, who prophetically insists on the freedom of his oppressed people, or instead of becoming sensitive to the careful observations of his officials, the king of Egypt only reacts to the environmental disaster. The locusts and, above all, the destruction of all "green" vegetation (v. 15e) become an experience of "sin" (v. 16c, 17a) and "death" (v. 17b) for the governor. That is, the "sin" (v. 16c, 17a) becomes a weight that needs to be "carried" (v. 17a), a "burden created by offence" (Anderson 2009:20). Indeed, concerning Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh, besides not having authentically fulfilled the prophet´s request, also had "expelled them from his presence" (Cassuto 1987:128). However, "what moves the Egyptian king is his person and his endangerment" – see the use of 1st singular in v. 17a–c –, but "his people are not in view and no concession is made" (Fischer & Markl 2009:122).

Surprisingly, in turn, "the locusts are carried away" (v. 19b) by a "very strong seaside wind" (v. 19a). "Not one of the locusts was left in all the territory of Egypt" (v. 19d; Exod 8:27). The nature that seemed to collapse offers the solution. Pharaoh unfortunately doesn´t discover the miracle and/or God´s presence in these events and, consequently, "he does not send the sons of Israel away" (v. 20b). In any case, the reader must ask the question about God.

5. God

The narrative in Exodus 10:1–20 is religious. "God" (vv. 3c, 7d, 8d, 16c, 17b) and the name of God translated as the "Lord" (vv. 1a, 2b, 3c, 7d, 8d, 9d, 10b, 11c, 12a, 13b, 16c, 17b, 18a, 19a, 20a) are mentioned twenty times. No other narrative character occurs more frequently. The number ten and its multiples also carry significant symbolic connotations, in the sense that they recall the "ten words" or commandments (Deut 4:13; 10:4), the smallest community group to be managed (Exod 18:21,25), and even the ten signs and or prodigies sent to Egypt and to Pharaoh (Exod 7:14–11:10). The tabernacle also hosts the number in question. There are "ten curtains" (Exod 26:1; 36:8), "twenty boards for the south and twenty for the north

side" (Exod 26:18, 20; 36:23, 25), "ten pillars on the west side" (Exod 27:12; 38:12) and the "curtain of twenty cubits for the gate of the courtyard" (Exod 27:16; 38:18). In addition, "everyone from twenty years old and over should give his contribution to the LORD" (Exod 30:14; 38:26).

How, in turn, does Exodus 10:1–20 portray God and his relationship to nature, especially considering all the "locusts" (vv. 4b, 12b, 13d, 14a.d, 19b.d) and the winds (vv. 13b–c, 19a) discussed above? To answer this question, however, we first need to understand what God is doing with the heart of Pharaoh, because the narrative is framed by this image. Initially, God says about Pharaoh: "I have made heavy his heart and the heart of his servants" (v. 1c). At the end, in turn, the narrator´s voice repeats: "And the Lord made the heart of Pharaoh strong" (v. 20a).

In the culture of biblical Israel, "the heart is above all the seat of reason and understanding, of secret planning and reasoning and of resolutions", in the sense that "the heart processes and orders impressions that come from outside" (Schroer & Staubli 1988:47). Even Pharaoh has "a heart to know/to learn/to observe" (Deut 29:3). The question is, therefore, what can and needs to be thought in the face of the phenomena that nature presents to people and society. This is also the challenge to be faced by those who rule Egypt. And God wants to help them in this task, "like the one who searches the heart" with its "vegetative, emotional, noetic, and voluntative functions" (Sutton 2018:259), "examining and knowing it" (Ps 139:23).

The book of Exodus mentions Pharaoh's heart on a total of twenty occasions. Sometimes Pharaoh acts with his "heart" (Exod 7:23; 8:11, 28; 9:34), sometimes the text only narrates how Pharaoh´s "heart" shows some reaction (Exod 7:13, 14, 22; 8:15; 9:7, 35). In ten cases, in turn, the description is aimed directly at what God does with the "heart" of the king of Egypt (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12, 14; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). God´s statement that He "made Pharaoh´s heart and the heart of his servants heavy" (v. 1c) is "a singular formulation" (Kellenberger 2006:131), suggesting that "the Lord himself gives Pharaoh´s and the courtiers´ hearts their weight and authority" (Kellenberger 2006:109–110), and the question of whether "the weightiness" must be "evaluated positively or negatively" depends "on the context" (Kellenberger 2006:41).

In Exodus 10:1–20, the point of the narrative seems to be that the king of Egypt and his officials are still expected to understand the signs of the times. God is even "performing signs of himself among them" (v. 1d). And Pharaoh´s servants understand, at least partially, what is happening. The oppressive policy of the governor, that is, his opposition to the Hebrew´s desire for freedom, "destroys Egypt" (v. 7f). There must be a connection between politics, environmental disasters, and the God of the Hebrews. Nevertheless, even though "the LORD", again and again, "makes Pharaoh´s heart strong" (v. 20a; Exod 4:21; 9:12; 10:27; 11:10; 14:4, 8), the latter "does not send the sons of Israel away" (v. 20b). The king of Egypt is not willing "to humble himself before" the God of his slaves (v. 3e), the descendants of Hebrew immigrants. Thus, the ruler may use all his "strength of heart" granted by the Lord (Exod 14:4, 8) to persecute those he oppresses and run to his ruin. Instead of "Pharaoh´s heart" (vv. 1c, 20a) becoming "heavy" (v. 1c) in the sense of gaining importance, capable of thinking what he should think, his heart "becomes heavy" in the sense of being immobile, ceasing to function (Isa 6:10; Zech 7:11). Notably, Pharaoh does not deny the existence of the God of the Hebrews. They should "go" (v. 8c), "and serve the Lord their God" (v. 8c) if there is a "feast" to be celebrated (v. 9d). But not all of them, at the risk that this will result in a definite exodus. Such a possibility the oppressor assesses as "evil" (v. 10e).

The biblical narrative discussed here still raises other points regarding God. There is "the ongoing historical effectiveness of God´s actions" (Janzen 2000:128). The locusts are the eighth "sign" that the Lord "performs among" (v. 1d, 2d) the Egyptians. That is, the origin of the locust plague is sought in God. In this case, the Lord says in his direct speech, "What I have provoked in Egypt" (v. 2b). In the same sense, Moses communicates God´s words to Pharaoh, "Tomorrow I will bring the locusts into your territory" (v. 4b). Even if this appears to be a natural spectacle at first, with serious consequences for the survival of humans and animals, the biblical narrative's religious reading of reality assumes that nature becomes transparent and allows God´s activity to be recognized.

However, according to the biblical narrative, God uses his agents to act in this world. In the narrative about the eighth sign in Egypt, there are "Moses" (vv. 1a, 3a, 8a, 9a, 12a, 13a, 16a), a character mentioned seven times (!), and "Aaron" (vv. 3a, 8a, 16a). The first is experienced as a "snare" (v. 7b),

an instrument used in hunting, by those who ruled Egypt with Pharaoh. However, there are also "various nonhuman creatures" among the agents of God (Fretheim 2014:600). On the one side, there are the "locusts" (vv. 4b, 12b, 13d, 14a.d, 19b.d) and, at the same time, the "east wind" (vv. 13b–c) and the "seaside wind" (v. 19a), that "carry" them (v. 13d, 19b). Later (Exod 14:21), at the "Sea of Reeds" (v. 19c), "such an east wind will also become God´s agent" (Janzen 2000:129). On the other side, always concerning "Egypt" (vv. 2b, 6a, 7f, 12b–c, 13a, 14a–b, 15e, 19d), geographical spaces like the "territory" (v. 4b, 14b, 19d), the "land" (vv. 5a–b, 12b–d, 13a–b, 14a, 15a–b.c.e) with its twelve mentions (!) and, even more, defined, the "surface (vv. 5a, 15a) of the land", the "field" (v. 5d, 15e), the "soil" (v. 6b), and the "houses" (v. $6a^{3x}$) become God´s agents to communicate the "signs" (v. 1d, 2d) sent from above. More specifically, plants – "trees" (vv. 5d, 15c.e) and "herbs" (vv. 12d, 15c.e), that is, every "green" (v. 15e), and the "fruits" (v. 15c) – also transmit mystically the divine appeal. Furthermore, the "darkness" (v. 15b), caused by the locusts, and the "hail" (v. 5c, 12e), recalled from the previous climate catastrophe (Exod 9:13–35), need to be added to the list of elements that invite the reader to reflect on eco-spirituality. In contrast to this, the animals of the "sons of Israel" (v. 20b) – "flocks" (v. 9c) and "herds" (v. 9c) – are unaffected by the environmental disaster and therefore become God´s agents in the opposite direction.

Conclusion

More than thirty years ago, Fretheim wrote a seminal article about "the plagues as ecological signs of historical disaster" emphasizing the "symbiotic relationship of ethical order and cosmic order" (1991a:385). The Bible presupposes that God has instituted these two orders in the world. For this reason, since Pharaoh pursues an anti-ethical policy and brutally oppresses the Hebrews, he simultaneously acts against nature. In his article, however, and even in his Exodus commentary, Fretheim discusses Exodus 10:1–2 in a small amount of space (1991a:391; 1991b:126–128). My argument here seeks to contribute further observations regarding the green and/or ecological reading of the biblical episode in question.

As highlighted in the subheadings of this article, the narrative in Exod 10:1–20 shows "a kind of conceptual triangle of connections between nature,

humans and God/gods" (Hunt & Marlow 2019:2). Concerning nature and/or the environment, one observes, on the one hand, how much the biblical text focusses on an insect, the locust, whose seven mentions underline its ability to multiply and devour all green vegetation. On the other hand, the biblical narrative is aware of the ecosystem, highlighting constantly areas and/or conditions of the land in Egypt, the seas, the winds coming from different directions, the climate and humidity, and the various types of plants.

In principle, the ecological system is independent. It would manage without humans. However, there is a possibility that the latter influences it. Taken as a whole, the texts of the Pentateuch advocate a harmonious co-existence of all beings on the earth. And this is not only in an indirect way, "by understanding nature as divine creation, but also directly, when, through certain exemplary laws, it is favourable to the preservation of fauna and flora" (Grenzer & Gross 2019:790). The episodes about the ten signs and/or prodigies in the Exodus narrative (Exod 7:14–11:10), furthermore, support the understanding that political decisions and, even more, oppressive policies which generate miseries impact the environment. In other words, these episodes contend that there is a relationship between human behaviour and environmental disasters.

At the same time, these texts defend the idea that God may permit environmental disasters of gigantic dimensions to cause changes in the thinking of political leaders and, thereby, to support political decisions favourable to the freedom of the oppressed and exploited. That is, where human will and strength seem to be insufficient, even when listening to the most qualified prophetic voices, nature, as God´s agent, can impose itself with an amazing force and change everything.

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