

REVISITING THE PLAGUES IN PSALM CV

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The traditions associated with the Plague narratives in Exodus vii-xii are reappropriated, in varying fashion, in Ps. lxxviii and Ps. cv. Suggestions concerning the relationship (or lack thereof) between the Pentateuchal sources and the two psalms have been numerous.¹ In revisiting the relationship between Ps. cv and the Plague narratives in Exodus, the present study will argue that a proper emphasis on the idea of land is central to interpreting the plague tradition as developed by the psalmist in Ps. cv. And further, that appropriate attention to the repetition of land in Ps. cv as a whole, and particularly in vv. 26-36, may offer a rationale as to the omission of the fifth and sixth plagues in Ps. cv, and further, the repositioning of the ninth plague to the beginning of the recital of the plague events.

The significance of land

R. J. Clifford² and A. Ceresko³ have both sought to explore the “rhetorical particulars of the poem”.⁴ And more central to the

¹ Those who contend that multiple Plague traditions were in circulation include S. E. Lowenstamm (*The Tradition of the Exodus in its Development* [Jerusalem, 1965]). He suggests “the traditions of the Plagues crystallized originally in various series of seven plagues (= Pss 78 and 105) and . . . the narrative in the Book of Exodus resulted from the amalgamation of different traditions of this type” (p. II). See also Lowenstamm, “The Number of Plagues in Psalm 105”, *Bib* 52 (1971), pp. 34-38. Other suggest some type of dependence on the Pentateuchal sources by the psalmists. See Hans Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* (Minneapolis, 1993), p. 309; R. J. Clifford, “Style and Purpose in Psalm 105”, *Bib* 60 (1979), pp. 420-427; B. Margulis, “The Plagues Tradition in Psalm 105”, *Bib* 50 (1969), pp. 491-496; and A. C. C. Lee, “Genesis 1 and the plagues tradition in Psalm cv”, *VT* 40 (1990), pp. 257-263.

² “Style and Purpose in Psalm 105”.

³ “A Poetic Analysis of Ps 105, with Attention to Its Irony”, *Bib* 64 (1983), pp. 20-46.

⁴ “Style and Purpose in Psalm 105”, p. 420.

present study, both consider the land a central, reoccurring theme in the book. As the psalm progresses through its historical recital of key events within the history of Ancient Israel, the emphasis on land remains steadily just beneath the surface.

The psalmist announces in *v.* 8 that Yahweh “remembers forever his covenant”. The covenant made with Abraham, sworn to Isaac, and confirmed to Jacob ultimately becomes for Israel a ברית עולם. Following the promise of the ברית עולם, the contents of that covenant are articulated in *v.* 11⁵,

To you, I will give the land (אֶרֶץ) of Canaan
As your inherited portion.⁶

As Clifford rightly notes, “it is significant that of the three-fold promise in Genesis to Abraham of land, progeny, and fame, only the promise of land is singled out”.⁷ Not only is the promise of land singled out from the other constituent elements of the Abrahamic promise, the concept of land governs the remainder of the psalm. Clearly, *v.* 11 operates in tandem with *v.* 44 to create an inclusio of sorts around the larger historical recital in Ps. cv. In *v.* 11, Yahweh promises the land of Canaan, and in *v.* 44, the psalmist concludes

He gave them the lands (אֶרְצוֹת) of the nations
And they took possession of the results of the toil of nations.

The intervening verses (*vv.* 12-43) reflect in varying fashion the psalmist’s reliance on the land as a primary vehicle for plotting the story of Israel:

⁵ The chiasm present in *vv.* 7-11 further signifies the correspondence between land and covenant: אֶרֶץ, עוֹלָם, בְּרִית, בְּרִית, עוֹלָם, אֶרֶץ. See A. R. Ceresko, “The Function of Chiasmus in Hebrew Poetry”, *CBQ* 40 (1978), pp. 2-3.

⁶ The terms “land” (אֶרֶץ) and “heritage/inheritance” (נְחִלָּה) appear to have been used readily in later psalms, particularly historical psalms, to express Yahweh’s covenant loyalty to Israel (cf. Ps cxxxv 12; Ps. cxxxvi 21-22). In both Ps. cxxxv and Ps. cxxxvi, the affirmation that Israel has received the land as a heritage appears at the end of the historical recital, perhaps suggesting not only that the inheritance of the land was the zenith of their historical experience, but perhaps more significantly, that the inheritance of the land fundamentally demonstrated the covenant loyalty of Yahweh. On the significance of land in post-exilic poetry, see F. C. Fensham, “Neh. 9 and Pss. 105, 106, 135 and 136. Post-Exilic Historical Traditions in Poetic Form”, *JNSL* 9 (1981), esp. pp. 43-45.

⁷ Clifford, “Style and Purpose in Psalm 105”, 423.

- vv.* 12-15 The patriarchs are described as strangers in the land (lit. כֹּהֵן)
- vv.* 16-23 The story of Israel's entrance into Egypt begins when Yahweh calls for a famine against the land (יָרָא) and concludes with the announcement that Israel will live in another land, the land (יָרָא) of Ham
- vv.* 24-38 The story of the plagues in Egypt recounts images of a decimated land. (See below for a more detailed analysis of land in this section and its implications)
- vv.* 39-41 The story of the Israelites sojourn in the desert (יָצָא) is recounted
- vv.* 42-45 The covenant first given to the patriarchs, and now inherited by the Israelites (*v.* 10), has come to fruition. Implied is that the Israelites have been led out (*v.* 43) of the other lands (Egypt and the Desert) to inherit the lands (יָרָא) of the nations (including Canaan, cf. *v.* 11)

Thus these verses subtly reiterate that not only is the patriarchal covenant about land (*v.* 11), but in some sense, Israel's entire history can only be understood in relation to land.

As suggested above, the pericope concerning the plagues (*vv.* 24-38) has received significant attention, yet the role of land in this section has received only nominal consideration. Clifford contends that throughout the psalm, three key terms, "land", "servant", and "chosen ones", appear repeatedly, serving as the interpretative keys for the entire psalm.⁸ Ceresko concurs with Clifford in that land serves as a primary theme throughout the poem, but adds that irony has been used to further underscore the significance of land. Despite the weighty insights offered by both, the enigmatic questions pertaining to the omission of plagues five and six, as well as, the rearrangement of the ninth plague are not adequately addressed in light of the land.

In an attempt to address the variations in the plague sequence, A. C. C. Lee has suggested that the present arrangement is predicated upon the creation account in Gen. i.⁹ Lee contends that *v.* 28 has affinities with Day 1 and Day 4, namely that both deal with the heavens. He then suggests that *v.* 29 is reminiscent of Day 2 and Day 5 in that the waters are alluded to in both texts. He concludes that the remainder of the section, *vv.* 30-36, is similar to Day 3 and Day 6 since the primary emphasis in both texts is on the earth. For Lee, the movement in Ps. cv 28-36 is from heaven, to waters, to earth, with

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 423-425.

⁹ Lee, "Gen i and the plagues tradition in Ps. cv", pp. 259-261.

the earth receiving the most attention. He further contends that the fifth and sixth plagues are omitted because they “present discrepancies in the final form of the text”.¹⁰ The primary discrepancy according to Lee is the death of all cattle in Exod. ix 3, yet the cattle are mentioned again in the plague of boils (Exod. ix 9), in the plague of hail (Exod. ix 22, 25), and in the slaying of the first born (Exod. xi 5, xii 12, 29). In essence, Lee avers that the psalmist, in his presentation of Israel’s history, alters the plague narrative in Exodus in his attempt to mimic the structure of Gen. i. According to Lee, the psalmist has done this to portray Yahweh’s power on heaven and earth. Conspicuously absent in the remainder of the psalm, however, is any cosmic imagery—the psalm appears rooted in the land, and the peoples who inhabit it. If Ps. cv employed cosmic imagery as found in another historical psalm, Ps. cxxxv, then his case would be much stronger.¹¹ Yet the absence of such imagery in Ps. cv ultimately cast doubts on Lee’s proposal, and once again raises the question concern the fifth, sixth, and ninth plagues.

The significance of land in Ps. cv proves critical in interpreting those verses devoted to the plagues. Verses 24-38 contain the greatest density of terms related to land. In verses outside of this pericope, ארץ occurs only four times, while in this one section, it appears five times. In addition, two related terms, נבול (v. 31, 33) and אדמה (v. 35) appear in this section, while absent in the remainder of the psalm. Based on the occurrences of these terms at least two observations deserve mention. First, all three terms appear repeatedly in Exod. vii-xii,¹² thus buttressing the claim that the psalmist did in fact have some knowledge of the Pentateuchal traditions.¹³ Second, the dense repetition of

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 261. See also B. Margulis, “The Plagues Tradition in Ps 105”. Margulis argues that to maintain consistency the psalmist had to adapt the hail plague as well as delete the plague of boils. His rationale is similar to Lee, with emphasis being on the final plague. Margulis concludes that the psalmist’s “treatment reflects the conviction that transmutation is preferable to contradiction” (p. 496).

¹¹ Ps. cxxxv 5-6: “For I know that the LORD is great and our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the LORD pleases he does in heaven and in earth, in the seas and all deep”.

¹² The most frequently occurring term is ארץ, appearing fifty-five times. The other two appear with significantly less frequency. נבול appears three times and אדמה appears twice.

¹³ The exact nature of the psalmist’s knowledge remains uncertain, and the occurrence of these three terms alone cannot fully substantiate a claim of dependence on earlier traditions. Yet the presentation of Israel’s history in Ps. cv to that in the Pentateuch warrants serious consideration. Kraus contends that a certain knowledge of

the terms associated with the land (8 occurrences) throughout this section suggests that for the psalmist, the devastation of the land by Yahweh, as a result of the plagues, was of central concern. If the psalmist did have some knowledge of the Pentateuchal traditions and further, intended to maintain a focus on the land, then perhaps both of these assertions together may help to explain the absence of the fifth and sixth plagues.

The omission of the fifth and sixth plagues

In Exodus vii-xii, each plague demonstrates a stylistic arrangement involving an introductory formula, a central core, and a concluding formula.¹⁴ A brief analysis of the concluding formulas of the plagues in Exodus may prove most helpful in attempting to determine the omission of the fifth and sixth plagues in Ps. cv. Part of the concluding formula involves a summation statement in which the narrator confirms not only the occurrence of the plague, but more significantly, its result. In the eight plagues mentioned in Ps. cv, the summation statements found in Exodus specifically mention the land. More specifically, these summation statements reiterate the ruinous effect that the plagues had upon the land.

Plagues in Ps. cv

Summation statement in Exod. vii-xii

Ninth Plague (v. 28)

“So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was a dense darkness in all the land (יָרָח) of Egypt for three days” (x 22).

First Plague (vv. 29-30)

“Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD commanded . . . The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and

the Pentateuch in its final form appears evident. More significantly, he opines that the psalmist even refers to “sentences of the Pentateuchal redaction” (*Psalms 60-160* [Minneapolis, 1993], p. 309). E. Gerstenberger suggests that the psalmist appears to “lean on Scripture in its final or near-final form” (*Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* [FOTL XV; Grand Rapids, 2001], p. 231). See also the earlier work of N. Lohfink (*Die Landverheissung als Eid* [Stuttgart, 1967], p. 2). The similarities between Ps. cv and the Pentateuchal sources, coupled with similar vocabulary (as is the case in vv. 26-36), demonstrate a probable link between the two works.

¹⁴ See F. V. Winnett, *The Mosaic Tradition* (Toronto, 1949), esp. pp. 3-15.

- there was blood throughout the whole land (יִרְאָ) of Egypt” (vii 20a, 21).
- Second Plague (*v.* 30) “So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up and covered the land (יִרְאָ) of Egypt” (viii 2, MT; viii 6, NRSV).
- Fourth Plague (*v.* 31a) “The LORD did so, and great swarms of flies came into the house of Pharaoh and into his officials’ houses; in all of Egypt, the land (יִרְאָ) was ruined because of the flies” (viii 20, MT; viii 24, NRSV).
- Third Plague (*v.* 31b) “All the dust of the earth (יִרְאָ) turned into gnats throughout the whole land (יִרְאָ) of Egypt” (viii 12, MT; viii 17, NRSV).
- Seventh Plague (*vv.* 32-33) “Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth (יִרְאָ). And the LORD rained hail on the land (יִרְאָ) of Egypt” (ix 23).
- Eighth Plague (*vv.* 34-35) “The locusts came upon all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country (גְּבוּלָהּ) of Egypt . . . They covered the surface of the whole land (יִרְאָ) so that the land (יִרְאָ) was black; and they ate all the plants in the land (יִרְאָ) and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left; nothing green was left, no tree, no plant in the field, in all the land (יִרְאָ) of Egypt” (x 14a, 15).

The inclusion of the tenth plague may be the result of the larger plague tradition. The striking of the first born is the only plague to appear in Ps. lxxviii, Ps. cv, Ps. cxxxv, and Ps. cxxxvi, thus indicating that in the historical psalms, the tenth plague operated as the governing image of the plague narratives in general. The presentation of the tenth plague in Ps. lxxviii and in Ps. cv suggests that the latter may have relied on the former in the description of the event.

Ps. cv 36
 He struck down all the firstborn
 in their land,
 The first issue of all their strength.

Ps. lxxviii 51
 He struck the firstborn
 in Egypt.
 The first issue of their
 strength in the tents of Ham.

Yet, even in the presentation of the tenth plague in Ps. cv, the psalmist has sought to maintain his emphasis on the land. Whereas Ps. lxxviii 51 indicates that this plague took place “in Egypt”, the psalmist in Ps. cv has altered the phrase to read “in their land (אֶרֶצָם)”.¹⁵

The emphasis on the land in Ps. cv 26-36 coupled with the emphasis on land in the concluding formula of the plague narratives in Exod. vii-xii may offer a rationale as to the omission of plagues five and six. Strikingly, in the summation statements of the fifth and sixth plagues, there is no mention of land. Following the announcement of the fifth plague, the narrator announces, “And on the next day the LORD did so; all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites, not one died” (Exod. ix 6). The term “land” (אֶרֶץ) appears earlier in the passage, but is omitted in the summation statement.

In the summation statement of the sixth plague, the plague of boils, the narrator explains, “So they took soot from the kiln, and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it in the air, and caused festering boils on humans and animals” (Exod. ix 10). Again, there is not an explicit reference to land (אֶרֶץ) in the summation statement.

Although the fifth and sixth plagues were no doubt horrific, for the psalmist, they were not about the “land” of Egypt. Therefore, it is plausible that the psalmist may have opted to omit these two plagues simply because they were not about “the land”. As will be suggested below, the psalmist’s focus on the land, and only the land, is critical to the poem.

The repositioning of the ninth plague

The placement of the ninth plague at the beginning of the pericope warrants renewed consideration in light of the proposal that the land is a central interest for the psalmist in Ps. cv. As indicated above, Lee has sought to explain the plague sequence in Ps. cv in light of the Priestly creation story. Lee avers that by making the ninth plague the first in Ps. cv, the psalmist has attempted to associate the darkness in Ps. cv 28 with the primeval chaos in Gen. 1. Lee is correct in that many of the historical psalms attempt to portray “both faith

¹⁵ Note also that the psalmist in Ps. cv has made a similar move in his allusion to Ham. In Ps. lxxiii 51c, the psalmist refers to “the tents of Ham (אֹהֶל־חָם)”, but in Ps. cv, when the psalmist makes a similar reference, he speaks of the “land of Ham (אֶרֶץ־חָם)” in v. 23.

in a God of creation and faith in a God of history".¹⁶ Yet in Pss. cxxxv, cxxxvi, and Neh. ix, the text includes a recital of God's work *at* creation (Ps. cxxxv 6-7; Ps. cxxxvi 4-9; Neh. ix 6) followed by a recital of his work *in* history (Ps. cxxxv 8-11; Ps. cxxxvi 10-22; Neh. ix 9-31). Psalm cv includes only the latter. Lee's suggestion that the creation theme has been woven into the historical account in Ps. cv appears to falter based on contextual grounds.

How then should the position of the ninth plague be understood? Clifford offers a modest proposal that deserves elaboration. He opines that

the answer [to the repositioned ninth plague] is to be found in the contrast between Egypt and the desert. God's first act against Egypt is the plague of darkness (*v.* 28). The first act for Israel in the desert is the lighting of night.¹⁷

He further contends that in the pentateuchal traditions, light is used as a sign of divine presence. The converse appears true as well. As Barnes has suggested, darkness is the chief sign of God's displeasure.¹⁸ Thus, the psalmist has not simply chosen "to organize scriptural witness at will",¹⁹ but instead has repositioned the ninth plague for rhetorical and theological purposes.

Later writers imputed theological significance to the plague of darkness. In the Wisdom of Solomon, the sage suggests that the darkness "came upon them from the recesses of Hades" (xvii 14). And further, those who were "captives of darkness" were considered "exiles from eternal providence" (xvii 2).²⁰ In rabbinic literature, it is suggested as well that the darkness that came upon the Egyptians was from Gehinnom (*Ex. Rab.* XIV, 2). In summary fashion, Philo concludes that the plagues created a distinction between the Hebrews and the Egyptians,

¹⁶ Lee, "Gen. 1 and the plagues tradition in Ps. cv", p. 263.

¹⁷ Clifford, "Style and Purpose in Psalm 105", p. 426.

¹⁸ W. E. Barnes, *The Psalms* (London, 1931), p. 505.

¹⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, p. 231. Similarly, Fensham avers that "it is possible that the poet of Ps. 105 has written from memory with the result that certain plagues changed places and certain were omitted. . . . And then there is still poetic licence" ("Neh. 9, Pss. 105, 106, 135, and 136", p. 41).

²⁰ Despite the relative brief treatment of the ninth plague in Exodus (x 21-23), the sage in the Wisdom of Solomon expands the tradition, making it the chief subject matter of the fourth diptych. Following the extended treatment of darkness in Wisdom of Solomon xvii 1-21, the sage announces, "but for your holy ones there was very great light" (xviii 1)—a structure similar to that which occurs in Ps. cv.

a distinction which "could otherwise have never been made so decidedly between the good and the bad, giving destruction to the one and salvation to the other" (*De Vita Mosis I*, 146). Similar to the psalmist in Ps. cv, these writers understood the plagues in general, but particularly the plague of darkness, as symbols of God's displeasure with the Egyptians, and further, as representative of his absence from the land.

The correlation between darkness and God's displeasure may explain the repositioning of the ninth plague. By placing the ninth plague first, the psalmist does more than simply assert that the land became dark. Rhetorically, the psalmist is announcing that the land of Egypt fell under the displeasure of Yahweh. The plagues that are subsequently listed in vv. 29-35 vividly illustrate the devastation wrought on a land that stands under the displeasure of Yahweh.

The influence of Deuteronomic theology

Psalm cv has traditionally been classified as a historical psalm. Yet as Fensham has suggested, the historical psalms often represent an actualizing of history with the intent of positing a religious message.²¹ Or as Hartmut Gese explained, historical material "gives an account of Israel's past in order to provide a point of orientation for present self-understanding".²² The emphasis on the land in Ps. cv indicates that in the attempt to "actualize" the history of Israel the psalmist has drawn extensively from Deuteronomic theology.

The psalmist begins the historical recital in v. 9 by recounting the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And the psalmist concludes the historical recital in v. 42 by claiming that Yahweh "remembered his holy promise and Abraham, his servant". The emphasis on the patriarchal promise echoes the emphasis on promise found in Deuteronomy. Eighteen times in the book of Deuteronomy the "promise-to-the-fathers" formula appears.²³ In Deuteronomy and in Ps. cv, this promise is coupled with land.

The psalmist also employs Deuteronomic language in v. 44a. There the psalmist announces "he gave (נתן) them the lands (ארצו) of the

²¹ Fensham, "Neh. 9, Pss. 105, 106, 135, and 136", pp. 35-36.

²² H. Gese, "Tradition and Biblical Theology," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Knight (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 312.

²³ P. D. Miller, Jr., "The Gift of God: The Deuteronomic Theology of the Land", *Interpretation* 23 (1969), p. 454.

nations". Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, statements appear suggesting that Yahweh has given (נתן) the land (ארץ) to Israel.²⁴ The second half of v. 44 reads "and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples". The entire verse appears to resemble the Deuteronomic phrase, "the land which Yahweh gives you to possess" (Deut. iii 19; v 31; xii 1; xv 4; xix 2, 14; xxv 19). Thus, clearly, the psalmist describes the giving of the land in vocabulary reminiscent of Deuteronomy.

The final Deuteronomic influence appears in Ps. cv 45, "that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws". The book of Deuteronomy is quite clear that the Promised Land and the occupation of that land are predicated upon proper observance of the law (iv 26; xi 17; xxviii 63; xxx 19). Deuteronomy xii 1 reads, "These are the statutes and ordinances which you shall be careful to do in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days which you live upon the earth". P. Miller acutely observed that in Deuteronomy "obedience is the *sine qua non* for continuing existence in the land, for Israel's life. Disobedience leads to war, catastrophe, loss of land, and death (4:26)".²⁵ Thus, the psalmist in Ps. cv appears to conclude the psalm by echoing Deuteronomy's insistence on the relationship between obedience (to the Law) and the land.

Conclusion

In the attempt to stress the significance of land, the psalmist has employed much of the language and theology of Deuteronomy. This overt stress on land also explains the alterations performed on the plague narrative by the psalmist, and the significance of "land" in the presentation of the plagues. The land of Egypt is presented as a place of "catastrophe, loss of land, and death,"—the type of land that might be inhabited by a disobedient people. In recounting the plagues, the psalmist has presented the land of Egypt as a foil to the land of Israel.²⁶

²⁴ For a complete list of usages of the two terms in Deuteronomy, see J. Plöger, *Literarkritische, formgeschichtliche, und stilkritische Untersuchungen zum Deuteronomium* (Bonn, 1967), pp. 124-126.

²⁵ Miller, "The Gift of God: The Deuteronomic Theology of the Land", p. 459.

²⁶ The book of Deuteronomy also compares the land of Egypt and the Promised Land. Whereas the other sources in the Pentateuch present the land of Egypt as a fertile place, the writer of Deuteronomy posits that it is a dry, flat land, watered only by the Nile. This stands in stark contrast to the Promised Land that is not only "milk and honey", but filled with "hills and valleys" replete with flowing streams (Deut. viii 7).

While the land of Egypt still stands as reminder of God's deliverance, it also contributes to the Deuteronomic tenor of Ps. cv. Egypt, as presented in Ps. cv, appears as an ominous reminder that those who live in the land must choose to "keep his statutes and observe his laws"—failure to do so will garner the displeasure of God, and ultimately, the desolation of the land.

Abstract

In revisiting the plagues in Ps. cv, this study suggests that the omission of the fifth and sixth plagues and the repositioning of the ninth plague may be credited to the psalmist's interest in stressing the significance of land in the history of Israel.



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