

# Religious Responses to Pandemics and Crises

Isolation, Survival, and #Covidchaos

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## Plagues, Withdrawal, and Wayfaring in the Hebrew Bible

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# 9 Plagues, Withdrawal, and Wayfaring in the Hebrew Bible<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

The story of the ten plagues that struck the Egyptians because the Pharaoh refused to free the Hebrews continues to live on in the Western imagination, from music to visual arts to cinema. Many people recognize references to the exodus story (Exod 7:1–12:31), regardless of their general level of biblical literacy, because of its catchy details and powerful replications in art and entertainment. Yet the Hebrew Bible tells us more about ancient perceptions of plagues than this famous tale of liberation. In this article, I analyze literary and cultural representations of plagues in the Hebrew Bible with a focus on the theme of movement.<sup>2</sup> By exploring links between plagues and (im)mobility, I draw attention to imaginations of and responses to health crises in the ancient eastern Mediterranean world.

The question of plagues and (im)mobility is timely as COVID-19 has urged virtually any person around the globe to consider their relation to movement. During the pandemic, there have been travel bans and border closures, which have affected both travelers and their hosts. However, the effects of COVID-19 on human mobility have not been limited to long-distance or regional travel but have been felt in daily life along with various civil restrictions and recommendations to practice social distancing. Those affected by the virus and their near contacts have also been subject to isolation and quarantine procedures. These actions have helped to limit the spread of the virus, but they have come at a cost, including social disruptions and issues of mental health.<sup>3</sup> This article examines texts in the Hebrew Bible which point to how things slow down during plagues. Yet, some biblical narratives suggest the opposite: at times, plagues may increase movement when a chaotic situation shakes the status quo and enables an otherwise unimaginable relocation.

There are a handful of related terms in Biblical Hebrew which simply get translated into the one English word “plague.” The most common one of them is נגעה (*nega*), but the terms דבר (*dever*), מגפה (*maggefah*), מכה (*makkah*), נגף (*negef*), קטב (*qetev*), and רשף (*reshef*) also refer to miscellaneous pestilences.<sup>4</sup> They are often presented as part of a wider cosmic plan, as punishments through which YHWH, the God of Israel, shows his majesty and

power over life and death.<sup>5</sup> They also serve as threats, warning the Hebrews not to ignore divine requests.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, there are texts that do not speculate on the cause or purpose of such harms but point to practical management strategies, thus indicating preparation for and resilience during difficult times. For example, people may visit a sanctuary to offer sacrifices or pray to avoid or free themselves from plagues.<sup>7</sup> Some texts, in turn, promote quarantine as a means of managing infectious disease (see more below).<sup>8</sup>

While the Hebrew Bible shows some concern for health-related issues, one needs to keep in mind that it is a collection of writings put together for a religious purpose, here mainly to serve as scripture. The texts were not written or compiled to illuminate or record practices of daily life in ancient Israel. Furthermore, the perspective provided by the text's final form is that of scribal elites who edited it to reflect their own agendas and worldviews. As such, the corpus does not express the views of all Israelites and Judeans/Jews. Yet, a close reading of it may reveal conceptions of healthcare as the ancient authors understood them.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows, I investigate notions of plagues in the Hebrew Bible with a focus on how they are imagined to either prompt people to move or hinder them from doing so. I begin with analyzing the representation of plagues as a catalyst for liberation in two narratives; these tales draw attention to how YHWH, here depicted in the role of a divine puppet master, uses them to control things. I then examine the evidence of legal, narrative, and poetic texts describing isolation caused by illness, which is characterized by the plague idiom and thus presumed to be infectious. While biblical laws concentrate on how to handle a plague, poetic literature elaborates on how it feels to be hit by one.

## 2 Plagues Prompting Mobility

While plagues are harmful, the misfortune of one group can help or even save another. This dynamic is illustrated by two narratives, in which plagues cause welcome disruptions, enabling the release of the Hebrews who find themselves stuck in undesirable situations.

Genesis, to begin with, contains mythical tales of ancient patriarchs and their families, including one about the time of Sarai and Abram (later known as Sarah and Abraham) in Egypt. The couple is said to have moved there owing to a famine (Gen 12:10).<sup>10</sup> The story is narrated from the viewpoint of Abram, who is anxious that Egyptians might kill him because of his wife's beauty, asking Sarai to present herself as his sister (12:13).<sup>11</sup> The locals indeed recognize the beauty of Sarai who is taken to the Pharaoh's palace (12:14–15). The ruler treats Abram well because of having acquired Sarai, giving him slaves and animals in exchange (12:16). However, YHWH expresses his discontent with the situation by causing perilous harm, afflicting the Pharaoh's household with "mighty plagues" (נגעים גדולים, *nega'im gedolim*) (12:17).<sup>12</sup> The angry ruler then sends Abram away with his wife and possessions (12:18–20).

In this tale of economic migration, Sarai and Abram leave Canaan in the hope of better material prospects. Abram's plot to take advantage of Sarai's attractiveness to improve his own prospects in a precarious situation follows a pattern known from several societies: the migrant woman is exposed to a type of sex work with the purpose of guaranteeing the family's financial success.<sup>13</sup> Yet the outcome, Sarai's placement in the foreign palace, results in the partners' separation. A God-sent plague solves the tricky situation by prompting the Pharaoh, horrified by the raging plague, to deport the couple from his country. This event of forced mobility serves as an act of deliverance. Having benefited from his deceptive deal, Abram leaves Egypt with wealth, embarking on a journey back to the land promised to him by YHWH earlier in the narrative (13:1–4).

The patriarchal narratives involve many incidents of mobility, including but not limited to the story of Sarai and Abram in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Yet this tale is relevant to the wider Pentateuchal narrative since it contains the first reference to Egypt in Genesis and prefigures the ambiguity that characterizes the relation between Israel and Egypt later on. For Israel, Egypt is a place of both shelter and mortal danger.<sup>15</sup> The patriarchal narratives are followed by the Joseph novella (Gen 37–50), which explains how the Hebrews ended up thriving in Egypt. Their circumstances in the new country of residence deteriorate, however, and the following exodus story is another tale in which plagues caused by divine intervention serve to deliver Hebrews who find themselves in an oppressive situation in a foreign land.<sup>16</sup>

The plot begins to unfold as Moses and Aaron consult the Pharaoh about the possibility to offer a sacrifice in the wilderness to avoid YHWH hitting the Hebrews with a plague (דבר, *dever*; Exod 5:3). The Pharaoh does not consent to the request, accusing the Hebrews of laziness (5:4–5). YHWH encourages Moses to continue the negotiation process (6:1–13, 28–30; 7:1–13) and eventually decides to discipline the Egyptians to free the Hebrews. This happens through a series of ten cosmic terrors, which increase gradually in severity, including an act of turning water into blood, frogs, vermin, swarms of insects, rinderpest, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the first-born (7:14–12:36).<sup>17</sup> The terrors are coercive as well as demonstrating the power of YHWH, who defeats the Egyptian deities.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the Pharaoh refuses to permit the departure. Only the final terror and the subsequent lament throughout the Egyptian households terrify him to the extent that he urges the Hebrews to leave the country (12:30–36, esp. 12:33). The night of horror and chaos caused by the tenth terror is fundamental to the cultural memory and cultic calendar of the Jewish tradition as it installs the celebration of the Passover festival (12:1–28); the collective memory of the terrors in Egypt also lingers on in other biblical stories and poetry.<sup>19</sup>

It is customary to refer to the ten terrors as ten plagues, but the term “plague” (נגע, *nega*) first appears in Exod 11:1, when YHWH announces the last plague to Moses, while it is not used of the nine terrors depicted in Exod 7–10. In fact, not all of them are plagues in the medical sense of the word.

Most of them are typical, albeit exaggerated, natural phenomena. Yet the fifth (rinderpest, דבר, *dever*), sixth (boils, שחין, *shekhin*; אבעבועה, *'ava'bu'ot*), and tenth (the death of the first-borns, מת כל-בקר, *met kol-bekor*) terrors seem to involve infectious diseases, posing a direct danger for the health and life of humans and/or animals.<sup>20</sup> This is obvious regarding rinderpest and boils (9:1–12) but also seems to apply to the tenth terror, the death of the first-borns, for the Hebrews must undertake ritual procedures and withdraw to their homes to avoid the death of their own first-born when YHWH passes through to strike the Egyptians (12:21–28). A link to plagues is established by the Hebrew root used of “striking” (נגף, *n-g-p*), since it also underlines the term נגף (*negef*), “plague.”

In Genesis 12, YHWH is imagined as a liberator of his people who controls illness and may cause even mortal harm to those who hurt the Hebrews. While the ten terrors harm the Egyptian “other,” the wider exodus story connects plagues with the Hebrews. As the thirsty and tired people complain about the harsh conditions in the wilderness upon their departure from Egypt, YHWH motivates them by promising not to send a plague as long as his commandments are kept (Exod 15:26, cf. Num 14:11–12). Yet the people break the covenant by building a golden calf, which prompts YHWH to strike them with a plague (Exod 32:35). YHWH also punishes the Hebrews with plagues later during the wilderness wandering, owing to their greed, rebellion, and idolatry.<sup>21</sup> Plagues thus serve as instruments of divine justice that may strike YHWH’s own people, whether for cultic or ethical reasons.

In summary, plagues are mentioned in two Hebrew Bible narratives as a means to set people free: it is after a plague that Sarai and Abram exit from Egypt where they had stayed as economic migrants, and after yet another plague, God delivers the Hebrews, this time as a collective, from Egypt. While plagues signal divine help in undesirable situations, they also harm the Hebrews as a divine punishment, and the authors invoke their threat to urge obedience and compliance. These texts on the mythical past do not help us to reconstruct historical events, but they point to a conviction of YHWH’s power over maladies. They imply a moody deity who uses biological weapons to help his people but does not shy away from punishing them by the same means in case of unpleasing conduct.

### 3 Plagues, Isolation, and Immobility

While plagues cause welcome disruptions in some narratives, they are undesirable to those hurt by them and may sometimes hinder movement instead of permitting it. Various biblical texts also reveal and reflect on this side of the coin. I will next investigate priestly laws and narratives suggesting that a person affected by a plague should withdraw and isolate themselves. I then analyze liturgical poetry on human experiences of loneliness and longing caused by illness-related seclusion. In these texts, plague imagery is frequently used to describe illness, which suggests that these illnesses are

considered infectious, and isolation is prompted by a desire to avoid further spread of the plague or to calm down an already raging one.

The Hebrew Bible mentions “healing” (רפא, *r-p-*), that is, restoration and recovery, but does not contain detailed information on medical techniques.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the authors stress YHWH’s role as the one who both causes illness and cures (e.g., Exod 15:26; Job 5:18). Yet humans, too, feature as health care personnel. Prophets are depicted as legitimate healers (e.g., 2 Kgs 4, 5, 8; 2 Kgs 20), whereas priests are assigned to serve in the process of identifying and managing illness.<sup>23</sup> A modern distinction between the “religious” and the “medical” realm does not apply; therefore, questions of healthcare appear as “cultural products” tied to ideological and religious views.<sup>24</sup>

In Leviticus, laws presented as divine revelation delivered to Moses and Aaron provide us with an ideological take on the priests’ job description. They are known for their sacrificial duties and administration of the sanctuary but also serve as health care consultants. It has been argued that a priest is not primarily a healer but a sort of inspector.<sup>25</sup> Yet he prescribes a combination of rituals and medical procedures. To protect the community from the threat of disease, the task of a priest, characterized as “the purificatory priest” (הכהן המטהר, *hakohen hametaher*) in Lev 14:11, is to prescribe measures that may involve sacrifices, ritual washing, or quarantine. Their purpose is to purify those whose physical conditions are regarded as unclean owing to some cause of impurity (טמאה, *tum’ah*).<sup>26</sup> In priestly thinking, impurity is regarded as preventing one from participating in the cult, and its removal is needed to achieve an ideal state of purity that enables one to be in the presence of the deity and join the public worship.<sup>27</sup>

Purification processes are compiled in Lev 12–15 with laws on the mother and her newborn child (ch. 12), contagious skin ailments (ch. 13–14), and infectious discharges linked with genital organs (ch. 15).<sup>28</sup> For us, it is relevant that the section in Lev 13:1–46 discusses acute cases of skin ailment in human beings as well as related measures of diagnosis, while Lev 14:1–32 outlines purification rites needed to remove the impurity caused by skin ailment.<sup>29</sup> Ch. 13 begins with the following statement, which introduces the key term “scaly infection” (13:2):

When a person has on the skin of their body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly infection (לנגע צרעת, *lenega’ tsara’at*) on the skin of their body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests.

The term used for “scaly infection” consists of two words, נגע (*nega’*) and צרעת (*tsara’at*).<sup>30</sup> Though *tsara’at* is often translated as “leprosy,” it does not denote the modern disease known by that name.<sup>31</sup> Instead, *tsara’at* is a collective medical term referring to several skin ailments.<sup>32</sup> It is never classified as a “defect” (מאום, *m’um*) in the Hebrew Bible, but those affected by this somatic condition are marginalized just as those suffering from various

defects.<sup>33</sup> Here, *tsara'at* is combined with נגע (*nega'*, “plague” or “affection”), which frequently refers, together with other derivatives of the root נגע (*n-g-*), to an affection, affected person, or affected articles in Lev 13.<sup>34</sup> Since the term connotes a plague and the following verses elaborate on quarantine practices, the text can be said to concern immobility associated with a type of “plague.”

Lev 13 outlines several cases of inspecting *tsara'at*, but I focus here on the issue of withdrawal in the light of the first section on symptomatology (13:1–8).<sup>35</sup> As quoted, a person exhibiting symptoms is to be taken to a priest (13:2) for examination as to whether he or she suffers from an acute skin ailment. There are different possible outcomes (13:3–8). Clear symptoms – a white discoloration of the body hair and lesions deeper than the surrounding skin – lead to proclaiming the person impure (טמא, *t-m'*).<sup>36</sup> The lack of obvious symptoms means that the possibly affected person is held for further examination. He or she is confined (הטגיר, *hisgir*) for seven days, only to undergo another inspection.<sup>37</sup> If the symptoms have not worsened, another seven-day quarantine takes place. Then the person is pronounced pure (טהר, *t-h-r*), given that the affection has faded. Yet, if the rash spreads on the skin thereafter, the person is declared impure indefinitely because of *tsara'at*.

Even minor symptoms should thus result in withdrawal, which ensures that the potentially ill person does not infect others in the community and render them incapable of taking part in public worship. However, the text does not specify the particularities of the procedure. Another law in the same chapter (13:46) simply states that a person continues to be impure as long as he or she is affected and should live “alone” (בדד, *badad*) and “outside the camp” (מחוץ למחנה, *mikhuts lamakhaneh*) (cf. Num 5:2; 12:14–15). This omission may pertain to the fact that Leviticus describes a utopian community instead of a real one.<sup>38</sup> Its laws were composed by priestly elites and were probably never enforced across all of society. Instead, they portray *ideals*, including the aesthetic norm of spotless skin.<sup>39</sup> The emphatic concern of the laws for collective purity may pertain to the processing of the trauma of loss that followed Jerusalem’s destruction and the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE.<sup>40</sup>

While it is unclear to what extent social isolation owing to skin ailments was practiced in ancient Israel, the priestly elite thought about and acknowledged the need for quarantine. Furthermore, the regulations were presumably subject to some dissemination among laypeople, who are the implied audience of Leviticus.<sup>41</sup> Yet, even if some people implemented the procedure outlined in Leviticus, this hardly applied to all members of the society; for example, the impracticalities of confinement for women taking care of young children or for someone living in an agrarian community and needing to work with others to support themselves and their families would have been immense.

Even if the priestly laws cannot be taken at face value as if they represented daily customs, there is some further evidence to support the prospect of social isolation and quarantine practices in ancient Israel. First,

the Mesopotamian material suggests that people with skin conditions were expelled from the city and excluded from society.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, 2 Kings 7:3 mentions four men with a skin disease (מִצְרָעִים, *metsora'im*) who sit outside the gate of Samaria. While the passing reference leaves many questions unanswered, it suggests that people with infectious diseases could be excluded from the rest of the society and left at the city gate “to beg or to perform undesirable tasks” to survive.<sup>43</sup> Such exclusion would turn ill people into forced migrants and internally displaced outcasts in their homelands.

Second, two parallel stories in the Hebrew Bible suggest that elites suffering from *tsara'at* had the privilege to isolate. They concern a king of Judah (8th c. BCE) called Azariah in the Deuteronomistic history and Uzziah in the Chronicles. According to both versions, YHWH strikes the king, owing to his cultic sins, with a skin ailment that bothers him until his death (2 Kgs 15:1–7; 2 Chr 26:16–21).<sup>44</sup> Both texts also mention that the king lived “in a separate house” (2 Kgs 15:5; 2 Chr 26:21), which implies an infectious disease posing a threat to others.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the story about Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1–15 contradicts such a practice. This commander of the king of Aram (9th c. BCE) suffers from a skin ailment (מִצְרָעָה, *metsora'*) and embarks on a journey after his wife's slave girl tells him about a prophet-healer in Samaria. Israel's king is suspicious of the foreigner, but Elisha urges a healing process. In this tale, the entrance of an impure person into Israelite society is not restricted, which shows that the biblical responses to infectious illness are not consistent.

Priestly laws portray ideal social realities, therefore, while some narratives depict elites isolating during illness. In both cases, they do not deal with average persons in society and should not be considered as the basis of common social practices in antiquity. They nevertheless suggest that quarantine could be undertaken by those who took priestly regulations seriously and/or could afford it. In addition, the passing reference in 2 Kings 7:3 exhibits the marginalized position of those excluded from society because of carrying infectious diseases. The psalms add to this picture by including expressions of seclusion. They highlight that illness is never just about the body but involves mental and social aspects as well.

Though ancient poetic texts such as psalms do not offer immediate insights into anyone's inner life, they are not fully detached from lived experiences. Remaining public representations of the self, poetic texts point to something beyond such a construction, for example, “aspects of the individuality, subjectivity, and uniqueness of the particular persons behind the voices.”<sup>46</sup> Given the frequent use of the first-person voice, psalms also invite new audiences to share and take part in the speaker's sentiment, which points to the text as a sort of archive of stereotypical experiences across time and place.<sup>47</sup>

Several psalms express wishes to communicate with the deity at times of trouble (e.g., Pss 22:2–3; 88:2–3, 14–15), and some of them refer to illness and healing in particular.<sup>48</sup> In a few cases, the speaker uses the term “plague” to describe his or her illness. The plea to YHWH in Ps 39:11 is a case in

point: “Take away your plague (נגע, *nig’ekha*) from me; I perish from your blows.” The lament of Psalm 38, one of the seven penitential psalms in the later Christian tradition, is another illuminating example.<sup>49</sup> The speaker recounts his or her encounter with illness, interpreting it as a punishment for sins and turning to YHWH on whom his or her misery and prospective healing depend (38:1–5). After the initial lament and appeal, the speaker details his or her bodily experience (38:6–13):

My wounds stink and rot because of my folly. I am all bent and bowed; I walk about in gloom all day long. For my sinews are full of fever; there is no soundness in my flesh. I am all benumbed and crushed; I roar because of the turmoil in my heart. O YHWH, you are aware of all my longings; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart palpitates; my strength has left me; the light of my eyes – I have lost it, as well. My friends and companions stand back from my plague (נגע, *nig’i*); my neighbours stand far off. Those who seek my life lay traps; those who wish me harm speak malice; they utter deceit all the time.

The vivid description highlights the physical pain and discomfort of illness, including the decay or even loss of certain physiological functions, as well as associated psychological and social consequences.<sup>50</sup> The speaker feels alienated from his or her close ones who keep away from him or her because of the “plague.” The mention of such distance reveals a feeling of being shunned by close ones because of illness; malady thus highlights the disparity between people, disrupts social relations, and causes feelings of solitude.<sup>51</sup>

In sum, biblical responses to plagues involve immobility. The authors of priestly laws and some narratives are aware of related health risks and mention or endorse exclusion and quarantine practices.<sup>52</sup> Liturgical poems draw attention to physical and mental well-being during illness by elaborating on experiences of pain, loneliness, and longing.

#### 4 Conclusion

For many of us today, COVID-19 has been the first personal experience of a pandemic. Related anxieties are something we share with one another around the globe, but aspects of the experience also tie us with those who lived before us. In ancient Israel, too, plagues prompted both affective experiences and practical responses. In the ideal world of biblical texts, just as today, social isolation and exclusion are practiced to control the spread of plagues, which protects the community but may cause the affected person to despair. The texts’ elitist nature also indicates how socioeconomic factors have always shaped people’s experiences of and possibilities to tackle illness.

Meanwhile, two biblical narratives, the tale of Sarai and Abram in Egypt and the mythical exodus, put forward a different perspective on plagues, as their take on them is even celebratory. In these tales, plagues sent by YHWH,

the divine puppet master, create horror and hence an escape from a tricky situation. The fictive tales reveal how a specific misfortune can harm some and benefit others, just as the impact of COVID-19 varied drastically, ranging from exposure to health risks (e.g., societally critical jobs) to unexpected travel opportunities (e.g., distance work from the comfort of a summer house). Despite the great temporal and cultural distance, the Hebrew Bible invites us to acknowledge and explore these timeless inequalities in ways how plagues treat people.

## Notes

- 1 This research was enabled by the European Research Council grant 948264 (ANINAN). Thanks are due to Sravana Borkataky-Varma, Christian Eberhart, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, and Rosanne Liebermann for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article and to the participants of the Aarhus-McMaster workshop on “Ancient Perspectives on Health and Illness” who discussed the question of social isolation with me.
- 2 All the English translations of the Hebrew Bible are from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, with occasional modifications.
- 3 See Pietrabissa and Simpson, “Isolation;” Seabra et al., *Pandemics*.
- 4 I agree with the Hebrew word נגף (*nega*’), as well as the related terms, being translated as “plague” broadly understood.
- 5 E.g., Deut 7:15–20; 2 Sam 24:10–17; 2 Chr 21:12–15. See also Hab 3:5 on YHWH’s lethal power.
- 6 E.g., Exod 15:26; Deut 28:58–63; Zech 14:12–19. On plagues as anticipated future horrors, see also Lev 26:25; Jer 24:10; 29:17; Ezek 38:22; Zech 14:12–18; cf. 2 Chr 6:28; 7:13.
- 7 See, e.g., Num 8:19; 2 Sam 24:21–25; 1 Kgs 8:37–38; Ps 91:5–6.
- 8 Following Kleinman (*Patients*, 72), I use the terms “illness” and “disease” as follows: “*Disease* refers to a malfunctioning of biological and/or psychological processes, while the term *illness* refers to the psychosocial experience and meaning of perceived disease.” This distinction discourages one from making diagnoses with modern Western biases; Avalos, *Illness*, 27.
- 9 See Broida, “Medicine,” n.p.
- 10 The lack of seasonal rains was the most typical cause of famines in Canaan. Some texts mention famines owing to natural catastrophes (Deut 28:38–40, 42; Joel 1–2) or political sieges (2 Kgs 6:25; 25:3). In Genesis, the motif signals that living in the promised land is not easy (12:10; 26:1; 42:1–3; 43:1–2); Sarna, *Genesis*, 93.
- 11 Cf. Gen 20:1–18; 26:1–18 on the motif of presenting one’s wife as one’s sister.
- 12 Note the wordplay: another meaning of the root נגף (*n-g-*), “to plague” or “to afflict,” is “to come into physical contact with” or “to harass sexually.” See Sarna, *Genesis*, 97.
- 13 On the sex work motif, see Strine, “Matriarchs,” 54–58.
- 14 See Strine, “Matriarchs,” 53–66; idem, “Jacob,” 485–498; idem, “Joseph,” 55–69.
- 15 Sarna, *Genesis*, 93.
- 16 The final form of the plague narrative combines priestly and non-priestly material; Zevit, “Plague,” 193–211.
- 17 Alternatively, the ten calamities could be interpreted as consisting of five pairs of terrors that pertain to the Nile River (1–2), are insects (3–4), comprise diseases (5–6), represent calamities devouring crops (7–8), and pertain to darkness (9–10);

- Rendsburg, “Exodus,” 114. In any event, the seemingly mild plague of darkness has puzzled scholars. Its effects may include blindness and lameness, which would explain why it was regarded as a devastating force; Moss and Stackert, “Disability,” 362–372.
- 18 On the coercive purpose, see, e.g., Exod 3:20; 6:1; 7:2, 16, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7. On YHWH as the defeater of the Egyptian deities, see Exod 9:14; 12:12; 15:11; 18:11; Num 33:4.
- 19 See Josh 24:5; 1 Sam 4:8; Amos 4:10; Pss 78:40–51; 105:23–38.
- 20 Sarna, *Exodus*, 45. On boils, see also Lev 13:18–23.
- 21 All these stories appear in Numeri. In Num 11:31–34, a plague is sent after a wind blows tons of quails to the camp of the Hebrews who gather more than they can eat. Soon after, the spies sent to explore Canaan die owing to a plague after they had urged people to rebel against Moses (14:36–38). The rebellion of Korah, Datan, and Abiram provokes yet another divine punishment: the earth swallows them (16:31–22), whilst a plague hits the Hebrews (17:12–15). Finally, a plague hits the Hebrews worshipping Baal-Peor (25:8, 18; cf. Ps 106:28–30).
- 22 Sir 38:1–8, on the contrary, praises physicians as YHWH’s collaborators. Medical themes are generally more prominent in early Jewish writings. Jub 10:10–14 even refers to Noah’s book of medical knowledge, the only medical work mentioned in Jewish texts. See Hezser, “Physician,” 173–197; Askin, *Scribal Culture*, 186–231.
- 23 In addition, various references point to the existence of physicians (Gen 50:2; Jer 8:22; Job 13:4; 2 Chr 16:12–13). On prayer and healing, see also Gen 20:17; Pss 6:3; 30:3; 41:5; 103:3; 107:20; 147:3.
- 24 Moss and Schipper, “Introduction,” 3.
- 25 Avalos, *Illness*, 366.
- 26 Levine, *Leviticus*, xiv, 75.
- 27 See esp. 2 Chr 23:19 and Avalos, *Illness*, 302, 321–326.
- 28 Levine, *Leviticus*, xiv.
- 29 Levine, *Leviticus*, 75. Lev 13:47–59 and 14:33–53 specify that procedures should take place if similar symptoms appear in cloth, leather, or building stones, whereas Lev 14:54–57 provides a postscript to the laws in chs. 13–14; *ibid.*, xiv, 84.
- 30 See also Lev 13:9, 20, 25, 27, 47, 59; Deut 24:8.
- 31 The association goes back to the Septuagint, which translates *tsara’at* with λέπρα (*lepra*). Yet the latter means “scaly condition,” while ελεφαντίασις (*elephantiasis*) is used of “leprosy” in ancient Greek; Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 775.
- 32 See Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 775; Avalos, *Illness*, 315.
- 33 Olyan, *Disability*, 47, 54, 60. The criteria for determining a “defect” remain obscure, but at least the majority of them were regarded as permanent or long lasting; *ibid.*, 28–29. Meanwhile, *tsara’at* is often temporary.
- 34 On the “sacred-medical” use of the term in Lev 13–14 and Deut 24:8, see Seybold, *Kranken*, 25.
- 35 Hereafter, the text continues with sections on chronic ailments (13:9–17), *tsara’at* as a secondary development (13:18–46), and *tsara’at* in fabrics and leather (13:47–59); Levine, *Leviticus*, 78–84.
- 36 It is not apparent why such a condition is regarded as a cause of extreme impurity (cf. Lev 13:45–46). A likely answer is that *tsara’at* causes a state involving the decay of flesh, which creates an association with death (cf. Num 12:10–12), and corpses were regarded as impure (cf. Num 19:11–22); Avalos, *Illness*, 306.
- 37 The text does not specify whether the isolation is against the person’s will, but the use of the verb סגר (*s-g-r*) suggests that her or his movement is restricted (cf. Ezek 3:24).
- 38 On this view, see, e.g., Marx, “*Lévitique*,” 415–433; Smith-Christopher, *Landless*, 144.

- 39 On the smooth skin as a priestly ideal, see Raphael, *Corpora*, 37; van der Zwan, “Skin,” 8.
- 40 Van der Zwan, “Skin,” 3, 9. The heightened focus on purity was perhaps a mechanism of survival for a minority seeking to maintain its distinctive identity under turbulent sociopolitical circumstances; Smith-Christopher, *Landless*, 149. On the postexilic date of Leviticus’ final form, see Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 12.
- 41 Raphael, *Corpora*, 38.
- 42 Walls, “Disability,” 25–26.
- 43 Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 312.
- 44 In 2 Kgs 15:5, YHWH is said to hit the king with a plague (נגע, *negaʿ*), and the ruler is then characterized as suffering from a skin ailment (מצרע, *metsoraʿ*). The account in 2 Chron 26:19–21 refers to how the king got a skin ailment (צרעת, *tsaraʿat*), and he is also characterized as מצרע (*metsoraʿ*). On the theme of skin ailment as a penalty for transgression, see Olyan, *Disability*, 55–56; Cranz, *Illness*, 115, 163–170.
- 45 The exact meaning of a “separate house” (בבית ההפשיה, *bet hakhafshit*) is unclear. It was translated as “in the house of isolation” (ἐν οἴκῳ ἀφορουσῶσθ, *en oikō aphphousōth*) in the Septuagint. It has been argued that the term stands for life-long quarantine, means the physical quarters in which the king lived, or refers to how the king was set free from his royal duties; Cranz, *Illness*, 165n4. The idea of isolated living is plausible in any event.
- 46 Olyan, “Self,” 40–41.
- 47 Similarly, Avalos, *Illness*, 257.
- 48 See Seybold, *Kranken*, 98–164. Regarding illness and recovery, see Isa 38:9–20 (cf. 2 Kgs 20); Ps 102:3–4.
- 49 See also Pss 6, 32, 51, 102, 130, and 143. The first unequivocal grouping of the penitential psalms dates back to Cassiodorus’ Commentary on the Psalms from the sixth century CE; Astell, “Psalms,” 37–75.
- 50 On the mixture of distress in Ps 38, see Avalos, *Illness*, 257; Raphael, *Corpora*, 110–114.
- 51 Cf. Thucydides, *History* 2.51, who comments on how people were afraid of visiting each other during the plague (νόσος, *nosos*) that ravaged Athens in 430/429 BCE, though he also notes how some made it “a point of honour to visit their friends without sparing themselves” (trans. C. F. Smith, Loeb Classical Library 108: 351).
- 52 While this article has focused on the Hebrew Bible, note that the rabbinic literature of late antiquity discusses the topic at times. Bava Kama 60b offers the advice to stay at home during a plague, while visiting the sick is appreciated according to Nedarim 40a.

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