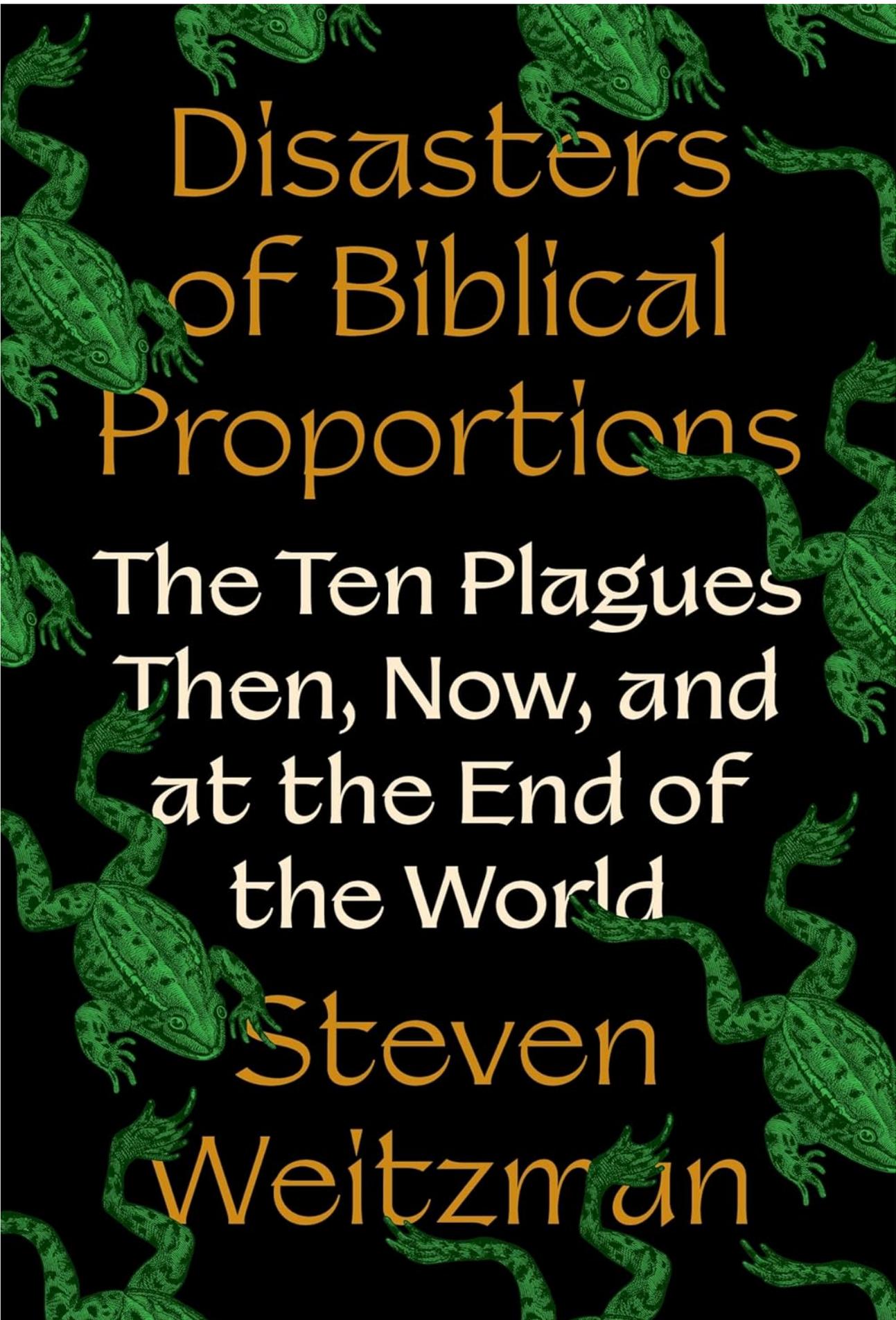




Disasters of Biblical Proportions

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Steven
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Steven Weitzman's *Disasters of Biblical Proportions: The Ten Plagues Then, Now, and at the End of the World* is both an authoritative reception history of the Ten Plagues narrative (Exod 7-11) as well as a demonstration of the ongoing relevance of biblical studies and comparative religious studies for the modern world. In an age where humanities programs, especially those that center on the study of religion and religious texts, are in jeopardy around the United States, Weitzman shows that the narrative of the Ten Plagues has a colorful history of influence not just across the last two millennia but also contemporaneously, within the living memory of its readers.

Wisely foregoing the literary and historical questions that pertain to what the plagues narrative originally meant, and choosing to see it instead as “not a single story at all but a multigenerational family of stories” (p. 5), Weitzman structures his book around each individual plague, highlighting one particular theme, method, parallel, or act of reception for that plague in subsequent religious and cultural history. Each chapter is titled for the equivalent ordinal plague (so, e.g., “The First Plague,” “The Second Plague,” etc.) and then subtitled to reflect this approach; in what follows, to avoid repetition, I will refer to the chapters by their subtitles. Chapter 1, “Blood Justice,” considers the changing symbolism of blood in the “evolving character of justice itself” across “different legal, moral, and cultural contexts” (p. 31). Chapter 2, “Who Let the Frogs Out?”—my favorite of the bunch—details the dissonance between the second plague as a divine punishment and the inherently humorous, unserious nature of frogs in Rabbinic literature and modern Jewish practice. Chapter 3, “Magic Meets Its Match,” shows that the interpretation of Moses’s wizardly showdown with Pharaoh’s mages (called Jannes and Jambres, following Hellenistic tradition) shifted across the Middle Ages and early modernity as the definitional nature of magic shifted. Chapter 4, “A Shelter in the Swarm,” looks at the literary and imaginative afterlife of Goshen, the supernaturally protected region of Egypt where the Israelites dwell during the Exodus, from the counterhistory of Manetho to twentieth-century Israeli wars.

From here, several of the plagues receive treatments more focused on their theological afterlives. Chapter 5, “The Great Cattle Massacre,” concerns the debate in Jewish and Christian theology, from Philo of Alexandria to the early days of the Protestant Reformation, over the moral worth of animals and the recurrence of cattle plague into the modern era as a sign of divine judgment. “Habits of a Hardened Heart,” chapter 6, looks at arguments in Hellenistic Jewish, New Testament, Rabbinic, and Christian texts over the relationship between human free will and divine determinism in sin and obedience, as different thinkers across the ages have attempted to make sense of Pharaoh’s growing recalcitrance in the Exodus narrative. Chapter 7, “Signs Just Before the End,” concerns the hail plague, and specifically the many reuses of the plagues narrative in eschatological scenarios from ancient apocalyptic literature and contemporary science fiction, and particularly the blurring between hail and astronomical phenomena that premodern people often saw as connected with divine judgment, an attitude that was transformed but never totally exorcised by the rise of contemporary cosmology. “Jaws,” the eighth chapter, follows the Qur’anic interpretation of the plague of locusts in Sura 7 and its modern reuse to explain a 2020 infestation in India. Chapter 9, “Darkness Visible,” is an art-historical treatment of the plague of darkness that ranges from Byzantine iconography to the work of Marc Chagall and Miriam Beerman. “The Night of Redemption,” finally, treats the death of the firstborn in dueling Jewish and Christian interpretations, showing both how these contrast with one another but also how they, in the very act of seeking to self-differentiate, borrow from one another.

The tour is not exhaustive, but it is illuminative about the real meaning of the plagues narrative: the way that readers of Exodus have continually returned to it to make sense of their own historical circumstances, from pandemics to wars to comets. Weitzman himself identifies the COVID-19 pandemic as his impetus to write the book, as he experienced during the Passover of 2020 “an intense and uncanny sensation of Covid-19 as the angel of the tenth plague passing from house to house and now drawing near to my own” (p. 276). The book, for Weitzman, was his attempt to respond to this experience of “the biblical past intruding into the present” (p. 277), which he admits is common enough for other readers but mismatched with his tendencies as a historian.

Historical critics of the Bible face a unique kind of puzzle. On the one hand, the job is to try, as far as possible, to reconstruct the original text and primary meanings of that text in their historical context. As such, reception history can sometimes help historical critics to see what's going on in the biblical text, but often it gets in the way. On the other hand, the biblical text only exists and is available for historical interpretation at all because it has been important to generations of readers beyond the original historical context in which it was composed, transmitting itself across successive contexts where, though the impact of the literal sense of the text may be blunted, the subtextual thrust of the narrative continues to be meaningful. The triad of text-context-subtext I owe to Michael Coogan, but there are other ways to express this dynamic. The late Daniel Harrington, S. J. wrote of "the world behind the text," "of the text," and "in front of the text."^[1] Michael Peppard captures this by speaking of "different biblical cultures" which make the text of scripture alive and relevant for different communities of worshipers, the details of which are in some sense the main finding of historical criticism.^[2] As he writes, "Historical research over the centuries has shown ... that the Bible is tradition."^[3]

Whichever framework we choose to express the complex relationship between the Bible and its context, Weitzman shows that there are some narratives in the Bible that simply beg for this kind of tradition-focused interpretation, that can only be understood well through considering the longer impact they have had on the consciousness of readers rather than through more surgical questions appropriate to historical study. The plagues narrative is surely one of the primary ones, and as of now, there is no better guide to how meaning has been made of it than Weitzman; and incidentally, it will make for an excellent read in the lead-up to Pesach.

Notes

^[1] Daniel J. Harrington, "Reading the Bible Critically and Religiously: Catholic Perspectives," in *The Bible and the Believer*, ed. Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington (Oxford University Press, 2012), 80-125.

^[2] Michael Peppard, *How Catholics Encounter the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 8-9.

^[3] Peppard, *How Catholics Encounter the Bible*, 20.

Source: [H-Judaic](#), H-Net Reviews. March, 2026.