Thanks for joining us for the second presentation on the book of Exodus where Dr. Peter Enns will introduce us to the plagues of Egypt to the Red Sea crossing as powerful statements about God’s purposes in Egypt and as a backdrop for the law at Sinai and tabernacle which form the second half of the book. Doctor Enns:

Let's look at the plagues then and try to understand the theology of the plagues. The first thing that I want to look at actually isn’t a plague but it’s the whole incident of the staff turning into a snake and that’s in chapter 7 verses 8-13. This is what is put before Pharaoh, the first indication of what is to come. It’s a fair question to ask: Why this? Why not a bolt of lightning hitting the court of Pharaoh? Why this staff of Moses turning into a snake? Well, because the snake is a power symbol in Egypt. If you remember Pharaoh’s headdress, you’ve seen either mummies or pictures on the History Channel where Pharaoh is wearing a headdress and the headdress looks like a cobra and that’s because that’s the power symbol in Egypt. You could also say that it’s a sign of things to come because later on we will read in Exodus 15 that the sea swallows the Egyptians. This first sign of the staff turning into a snake and then the snake of Moses swallowing the snake of the magicians of Pharaoh is already a harbinger of how Egypt is going to get swallowed.

Now what is very interesting here is the fact that Pharaoh’s magicians can do it as well and I don’t think that we should overlook that. We like to appeal that this story as a miracle of God, but Exodus is very clear that the magicians were able to do it as well. That reminds me that I think that the universe of the world that we live in is much bigger than what our minds allow. So frankly I take that part literally. In fact, the impact of what Moses’s staff does means nothing if the staff of the magicians don’t do the same thing. So I think we should take that as it stands and not try to find it naturalistic solution as some commentators do.

The first plague is the water of the Nile and other water turning into blood and that starts in chapter 7, verse fourteen and goes through verse 24. This plague effects the Nile,
why the Nile? It’s the Egyptians' power base, politically and culturally. Without the Nile, Egypt doesn’t exist. So we’re actually at the very beginning here going right to the heart of the matter. It is also an answer to chapter one. Again, let's look backwards and let's look forwards as we read Exodus. The male children of the Israelites were thrown into the Nile and God is saying if you want to play that game, I can play that game too. You turned it red with the blood of Israelite male infants I will now turn it red with blood as well. It's also a preview of what’s to come in chapter 14 again where there will be death and blood in another body of water, the Red Sea, not the Nile.

Another reason why the Nile is picked, and this really connects to the first reason I gave, the power base for the Egyptians. There seems to be here at work a polemic against the Egyptian pantheon, against the Egyptians gods. The god Hapi is the god of the Nile. So to attack the Nile is to attack also Egyptian religion. That, I think, is very important in Exodus and we’re going to come back to this in a few minutes as to why that may be an important factor theologically.

Some commentators suggest that this incident with the snake, the staff, and the first plague and the first couple of plagues really are just a softening up process of moving to the stronger plagues at the end. There may be some truth to that but I don’t think that is the case. I think this first sign of the staff and the first plague are already problematic, strong statements. They are indications of what will happen. It's telling at the beginning what the eventual outcome will be in no uncertain terms. As with the sign of the staff, the magicians here are also able to reproduce this plague, which raises a couple questions. Why in the world would they want to, other than to show that they could do it too? And the other question is, how are they able to do it when this seems to be a miracle? And again the explanation we had before still holds here. For whatever reason, the magicians of Pharaoh’s court are able to reproduce this and to take that seriously is to take seriously the theological trajectory of the book of Exodus and beyond it.

The second plague concerns frogs and that’s in chapter 8, verses 1-15. This is another Nile plague. These frogs come from the Nile. Here is another plague where there
is more death coming from the Nile, there is blood in the first plague, here there are frogs. This is not cute; these are not frogs chirping around Egypt. This is a sanitary hazard. It’s more than just an annoyance. It’s a bad thing being overrun by these frogs. This is the first animal plague; it is the first incident of unleashing the animal kingdom on Egypt. We can think here of Genesis where the point of the Creation story in Genesis 1 is God is ordering the chaos. There is chaos and God orders it. So he says dry land is here, sea is there. You’re going to have all types of animals after their own kind and these animals live in the air, in the water, and on the earth. What we see here in the beginning of this plague is the undoing of that order. They don’t stay in that place; they invade where they shouldn’t be. Again, as we mentioned before, that’s appropriate theologically in Exodus because Pharaoh is such an anti-creation force that here God is unleashing the forces of creation against Pharaoh. Here what seems in such an innocent way but which really isn’t, Heket is the fertility god in Egypt and that may be important because this a response to what we see in chapter 1 where the Egyptian male infants are killed or at least attempted to be killed, and here God is punishing the Egyptians in like manner. This is also the last plague that the Egyptian magicians can reproduce.

That raises the question of why they would want to reproduce it. If they really wanted to show how good they were, they should have taken them away and not added to the problem. The point however is that only God can restore the order to chaos. The magicians can add to the chaos but they cannot restore the order of chaos. That’s the very important image of ordering chaos and this is what the true God is supposed to be able to do.

The third plague concerns the gnats. That is chapter 8, 16 to 19. Think about this plague of gnats this way. The second plague concerns the frogs, and this is an animal coming from the water. The third plague which we have here, the gnats, animals, coming from the dust. The fourth we’ll look at in a second. The flies is animals coming from the air. So on the second, third and fourth plagues, you have represented the three elements of the ecosystem, water, earth, and air. The magicians are only able to reproduce the Nile plagues, they are not able to reproduce the dust or earth plague. The fourth plague, they
are not able to reproduce the air plague. That might indicate that again the importance of the Nile as somehow the source of their magical abilities. I can't get into that because I do not understand it. I don't know if anybody else does either, but it is significant that their ability to do things stops there, which is again is an indication of why it is important for the plagues to begin with the Nile to cut off the power base at the very outset. To pull the magical rug out from under them, so to speak. This is all they have, they can't do any more. This is why we read here in verse 19 of chapter 8.

This is the first recognition on the part of Egyptians is that they are in over their head. And if we look at verse 19, I’ll read that, “the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'this is the finger of God.' But Pharaoh's heart has hardened, so he would not listen, just as the Lord had said.” The magicians said to Pharaoh, "this is the finger of God." That is one way of understanding what we read of Hebrew of Exodus. I don’t think here Egyptians are confessing faith in Israel’s God and saying this is the true God with the capital G. I think probably a better way of understanding this is not to say, “this a finger of God” but this is “a finger of a god.” They are beginning to recognize that what Moses is able to do with his staff and the plagues ultimately comes from God, a finger of a god. They know they are dealing with something or someone very very powerful. It is a true recognition of what’s happening but it’s not a full recognition of what is happening that will have to wait for a little bit.

The fourth plague is the flying plague and that is chapter 8 verses 20-32. This is the first plague to make a clear distinction between the Israelites and Egypt, that is something that will become more prominent as we go through the book of Exodus where there are distinctions being made between the Israelites most clearly, and we'll see that in the crossing of the Red Sea. There is clear distinction made between the Egyptians, who pass through and are drowned, and the Israelites, who pass through are not drowned. So here we see already in slight anticipation of what we are going to see later on. What may be the most interesting aspect of this plague is in verse 22, “On that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, which is where the Israelites were. This the aspect of distinction between Israelites and the Egyptians. "In the land of Goshen is where my
people live, no swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the Lord, I am in this land.” I will make distinctions between my people and your people, and the miraculous sign will occur tomorrow.

The purpose of this plague, in fact, the ultimate purpose of all of the plagues, is so that, “Egypt will know that I, Yahweh, I, the Lord, am in this land.” Ultimately, the purpose is not salvation for the Israelites, what do I mean by that? The purpose of the plagues is not to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. We’ll see that a little bit later perhaps more clearly. He could have done that very quickly had he wanted to, he could have let them go. But the purpose of the plague is so that “the Egyptians will know I am in this land.” Earlier, in chapter 5, which we didn't look at in any detail, there was Moses and Aaron confronting Pharaoh and saying, “Our God, Yahweh, says ‘Let my people go,’” and Pharaoh says, “I don’t know Yahweh. I don’t know your god and I am not letting your people go.” Now, you could hardly blame Pharaoh, and I don’t know how he would have known who Yahweh was, this was a God of desert crawling people, this is a God of slaves. This is not an important God in the Egyptian pantheon. The purpose of the plagues is to correct that misunderstanding, or the lack of understanding on Pharaoh's part so that he will know who Yahweh is. I think that's important for the theological movement of the book of Exodus.

The fifth plague concerns the livestock, and this is in chapter 9 verses 1 through 7. What’s different about this plague? This is the first plague against created things rather than simply employing creation or created things. Again, this a harbinger or a foreshadow of things to come, where the plagues, more and more, will be against created things, and ultimately be against the Egyptians themselves. This does not just effect the water or the land or cattle, but eventually, it will affect the Egyptians themselves. Verse 3 here is, I think, a bit tantalizing, and we have to be careful not to make too much of this, but a number of commentators point this out, I think this a valid observation to make. Verse 3 refers to, “the hand of God.” Starting in verse two, "If you refuse to let them go and continue hold them back, the hand of the Lord will bring in a terrible plague on your livestock and the field." Commentators have noticed that here in chapter 9, the plague is a
result of the hand of God being against the Egyptians. We just read in chapter 8 verse 19 with the plague of gnats that it’s a finger of God, and again, it’s tempting to read a whole a lot into this. Be careful not to do that, but it’s worth pointing out, I think, that it’s the finger, and now it’s the hand of God. The plagues are increasing in their severity, and that is something that is patterned out, that we will see develop with the rest of the plagues culminating and the Red Sea.

With the respect to the livestock, also I should point out that the Egyptian goddess Hathor, is the mother, or sky goddess in the Egyptian pantheon. She is normally depicted as a cow. So, here we possibly have another example of the plagues being focused on elements of Egyptian religion, where God is showing, sort of one by one, "I am better than this god, and I’m better than this god, and I'm better than that god." As I said before, that will come into play a little bit later on, prominently in the book of Exodus.

The sixth plague is the plague of boils, and that’s chapter 9:8-12. This is the first plague that demonstrates that the lives of Egyptians are in fact in danger. So, we have a clear movement towards the tenth plague. The source of the plague is soot from the kilns that soot comes up and that creates the boils. And now, why might that be important? Well, this is poetic justice for the Israelites making bricks for Pharaoh’s building projects; that very source of stress and suffering for the Israelites is now turned right back on to the Egyptians and that’s soot from the kilns that produces the boils. This is the first time, also in the sixth plague is where God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, and we saw that before when we looked at 3:19 and 4:21. Again, what does it say about free will? And my answer is nothing. It doesn’t say anything that can be, I think, quickly or superficially applied to how we think about faith and salvation. It has specific focus on this story that demonstrates God’s complete sovereignty over delivering his people. If it has any relevance to other sources of theological discussions, which it may very well, I think that has to be done with a little bit of digging and a little bit of leg work, not just too superficially. There is a real tension, as I said before, between 3:19 and 4:21, where God is really saying, "Let’s keep the game going a little while longer." See? Here, Pharaoh already has had enough with the sixth plague. He wants to give up. He seems to want to
cooperate, but God simply doesn’t allow it to happen because he is not done yet. The purpose for which he raises Pharaoh up has not yet been completely fulfilled.

The seventh plague is the plague of hail, and that is chapter 9:13-35. This is the largest narrative in the plague except for the tenth plague, which has always struck me as being a little bit of unusual. Why the seventh plague? I am not exactly sure to be honest, but it is the longest of the narratives of the plagues. It’s a plague from heaven. Verse 14 says, “This is now the full force of what God will do,” perhaps because this plague is coming from heaven. Hail is often associated with some great act of divine judgment in the Old Testament. Verse 23 mentions even fire associated with the hail. Many of you, of course, have seen the movie, “The Ten Commandments” with Charlton Heston, and there we see a picture of hail falling and bursting into flames. That, at best, is difficult, I think, to get out of the Book of Exodus. The fire may simply refer to lightning that is associated with this hail storm, and we probably should not make much more out of it than that.

But the seventh plague, theologically, is important for another reason. Moses here says, “Let’s let Pharaoh in on a little secret,” and we see that in chapter 9:15-16. “For by now, I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with the plague that would have wiped you off the Earth. But I have raised you up for this purpose that I might show you my power, and,” this is the important part, “that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” This is the reason for the plagues that I hinted at a little bit earlier, here’s a name very, very exclusive. “The plagues are there for me to make it crystal clear,” if I can put it this way, “that I, alone, am worthy of worship. The gods of Egypt are not; later on, the Israelites; the gods of Canaanites are not; I am, because look at what I am doing. I am this God of slaves, I am this God of desert dwellers, and what I am doing is I am coming into your own territory, I am walking onto you turf, I am walking into your powerbase, I am walking into where you would be the most powerful. I am coming out off of my mountain, off of mount Sinai, and I am now on your turf and your area, and I am pretty much doing whatever I want to do. I could do this much more quickly but I have a point that I want to make, and I want to make the point crystal clear.” I would say even, I don’t want to exaggerate these two verses, verses 15 and 16. But
along with what we saw in the end of chapter 2:23-25. There’s certain highlights theologically of the Book of Exodus that help us really understand what the book is about and I think these two verses are one of those highlights. So, I think they bear paying close attention to.

The eighth plague is the locust plague in chapter 10:1-20. Like the hail, this is results of widespread devastation on people, on beasts, on crops. Why locusts? Locusts mean judgment in several places of the Old Testament. For example, Joel chapters 1 and 2, locusts are just bad things because they just eat everything in their path and they’re a sign of God’s judgment. The locusts come to the land by an east wind. Later on, we will read that the parting of the sea also comes from an east wind. So, we have here, maybe again, a slight anticipation, a sort of ball rolling, and it’s going down the hill to culminate in the Red Sea incident, and we see that anticipated a little bit here. Likewise, the locusts, what happens to them? They are driven into the Red Sea and die there. We’re going to see that obviously a little bit later as well. The locusts, there are so many of them, they cause darkness. What does that do? Darkness anticipates the ninth plague, where there is darkness over the land. So, this locust plague is more than just an annoyance, but the locust plague is part of the momentum of the plagues that will bring us to the ninth plague, the plague of darkness, and the tenth plague, which is a plague on the firstborn.

The ninth plague is a bit brief, chapter 10:21-29. This is probably the clearest example of anti-idol polemic in the plague narratives, a polemic against Egyptians’ pantheon. The Egyptian god, Ra, sometimes spelled Re, is the sun god of the Egyptians, and often times, the high god. The Egyptian kings, Pharaohs, were considered the sons of this sun god. And so we have a very powerful theological statement on a couple of different levels, that by darkening the earth, Israel’s God demonstrates his superiority over the most superior element of the Egyptian pantheon. He shows superiority by extension over the king of Egypt, that he can make it dark when it should be light. This making darkness where there should be light is also a reversal of creation of what we talked about before. It’s reintroducing the pre-Creation chaos back into the Creation order temporarily. Remember, Pharaoh sets himself up as an anti-Creation force, and God
says, if I can put words into God’s mouth, I don’t feel comfortable doing that, but for sake of discussion, God says “If that’s the game you want to play, I will unleash my creative forces against you.” And in each and every conception of Creation, again it's making order out of chaos. And one of the first elements of order was that God makes light. And He separates light and darkness. And here, He’s undoing it and collapsing it. If you want to work against me as Anti-Creation force, I’ll show you anti-Creation, and I’ll make it dark when it should be light. So, you know we should read this on more than just a superficial level, what a nice little trick God pulled. There are theological foundations and underpinnings that I think have a lot of meat and substances to these plagues.

The last plague is the longest discussion, and that begins in chapter eleven, verse one, and it goes until chapter thirteen, verse sixteen. And that, of course, is the plague of the death of the firstborn. And in the midst of that, you have a lengthy section on the Passover and its significance. They’re obviously very connected. This is the first plague, in fact, the only plague that cannot be undone. It’s the final devastating blow. The god Osiris? He is the god of the dead. And what we see here is, God has ultimate power over death. Why the death of the firstborn? Well, at least one reason for that might be as retribution, again, for what happened in chapter one. If you treat my first born this way, I will treat you this way as well. This is the plague, also that directly results in the release from Egypt of the Israelites, and it is the climax of the story that leads up to this point.

Now, there’s so much that we could look at here with respect of the Passover, and other kinds of things and we have to restrict our discussion because we don’t have all the time perhaps that we could take on this. But I just want to pause on one or two things that I think are very, very important. I know as Christians, I know speaking as myself, we lead the story of the tenth plague and then the Passover. And it may not connect very nicely with our lives. We don’t celebrate Passover, and we know something about Jesus being the Passover lamb, and all that’s fine. But how this is functioning in Exodus is all of my focus now. Killing the Egyptians’ firstborn is what God has been driving towards all along. We must resist the temptation to read the plague narrative as God thinking, “This isn’t really working, you know, the Nile, the blood isn’t working because the Egyptians
can reproduce that, Ugh, this isn’t working. Ah! I know what I’ll do! I’ll kill the firstborn of Egypt. I betcha that’ll do it. Let’s see if that works.” Remember what we read earlier. I could’ve done something all along, but I’m keeping this drama going for one purpose, so that there’s no doubt in anyone’s mind, including the eyes of the world, who will be looking at this, as to what I am able to do. It’s not the last measure, again, to say, "Let’s see if this works." As hard as this might be for us to swallow, and to be honest, I hadn’t been able to work through the implications myself.

The killing the Egyptian firstborn is something God does for whatever mysterious reason, but because he has the right to do it. Now what do I mean by that? This can get us so far off-field. But we have to ask ourselves this question: why did the Israelites need to distinguish their firstborn? I mean, just think about that for a second. Why isn't the 10th plague just saying, "I’m going to kill just the firstborn Egyptians and leave all the Israelites out of it?" Why did the Israelite’s need to paint their door posts with the blood of a lamb? As if God can’t tell the difference between an Egyptian and an Israelite. Why is that? Well, good question, I’ll try to answer it. Why does God do that? Because there’s a theme we see in the Bible, not just in Exodus but in other places, especially the Pentateuch, where God has a right to the firstborn. The firstborn belongs to God. I don’t know what that means. When God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22, He did that because he had the right to do it. The firstborn belongs to him. Now, in Israel, you had a system of substitution, where you would substitute the firstborn with something else. You would usually substitute the firstborn with some animal, which was unblemished, and that’s what’s happening here as well. We can think, in that context, you know, maybe think a little bit ahead into the gospel itself, and this is a mystery, I don’t claim to understand it, but I think there’s something here that we can think about. Christ is the first instance where God actually exercised the first claim over the firstborn completely. His own son, his firstborn, his only son, is the only time God actually carries it out. There is no substitute now for that first born, the first born actually becomes the substitute for everyone else, and I think I only bring that up to encourage you to not just skip over the Passover section too quickly. It's got the regulations of about this and about
that and we don’t do that anymore. We don’t do it because it’s done for us, and I think it
gives us some meaning to Christology and some meaning on Jesus and who he is, when
we understand Exodus here in the original context and what it's trying to do.

Now, the plagues, as we just said, results in Israel’s departure from Egypt, and the
purpose for which Israel was released was not simply to be freed. When Moses is arguing
with the Pharaoh, earlier on, he says not, "Let my people go, so they can do whatever
they want," it's "Let my people go, so that they might serve me in the desert." Well, that’s
what’s happening now, they leave Egypt, and go into the desert, to Mount Sinai, so that
the Israelites can serve God, and that, in a way, almost summarizes the drama in the book
of Exodus, because the question is, “Who will Israel serve?” And Pharaoh says that
they’re going to be here, he says, "They’re going to serve me, by building these buildings
and by being my slaves.” God says, “No, Israel is my son, Israel belongs to me, and they
will serve me." So it's not just "Let my people go." In another way of putting it, Israel
was redeemed from Egypt and they were taken from one form of servitude and put into
another form of servitude. So you're not serving Pharaoh and what he represents, you're
now serving Yahweh, the God of Israel, and what he represents. That’s why when you
leave Egypt, you come very quickly to Mount Sinai, and you spend the rest of the time
there, you spend an awful lot of time in Mount Sinai, as a matter of fact. The focus of
attention then is law and tabernacle. Those two things start really in chapter 19, chapter
20; the second half of the book is concerned with those two things, because Sinai law and
tabernacle, which have to do with sacrifice and religious worship. That is why they were
brought out of Egypt. It's not so they would not be slaves, O poor Israel, it's so they
would now be enslaved to the right God and the right King, which is Yahweh himself. He
has the right to do that, he has a right to require that from those people because he is the
one who brought them out of Egypt, he has earned that right, so to speak.

We have talked a lot already about the connection between deliverance and
creation. I want to continue that, I want to keep that in your mind, as we look here at the
law and the tabernacle. I don’t want to overdue it. I don’t want to say that this is all there
is to think about with Sinai with the law and with the tabernacle, but this is one way of
organizing the theological trajectories of Exodus, to keep in mind this theme of creation, and I think we will see that also in talking about the law and the tabernacle. Hopefully that will give us maybe mental hooks upon which to hang what appears to be very detailed information in the book of Exodus, I think it's a good pedagogical tool for us too keep in mind.

One idea that may seem like just an extraneous comment here, I don’t want it to seem like that, but this will come into play in a minute, I want to point out something in chapter 15 before we start talking about the law. Chapter 15 is the song that the Israelites sang after they crossed the Red Sea, and the content of that song has a couple of things in it that I think are very important for us to get a handle on. I don’t want to read the whole of chapter 15, it's far too long. But chapter 15 is a song to God for his deliverance and what he’s done bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. It basically has three parts to it: the first ten verses praise God for beating pharaoh up, basically, it praises God for winning for saying this is what you did, horse and rider you have cast into the sea, and look how great you are. Verse 11, is the verse I want to focus on for a second, it says Yahweh, our God, is the best God. And then verses twelve through eighteen basically say, "Watch out Canaan, here we come." It is praise to God for what he’s done, and then declaring our God is the best God. Verse eleven puts it this way, and this is something you see in other places in Psalms and a few other places as well. “Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you, majestic and holy, awesome in glory working wonders? You stretched out your right hand.” Verse 12, “and the earth swallowed them.” God is the one who does these things. I don’t want to be misunderstood, because this could be misunderstood, it might even sound controversial, but I think in the context of Exodus, it isn’t at all. By bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, God demonstrates that the gods in Egypt are no match for him. Listen to what I said. I didn’t say there are no other gods, I said he demonstrates that he’s greater than the other gods. You have this polemic with the plagues where God is showing his mastery over these gods of Egypt, and he’s going to do that again. When they go into the promised land, God will show his superiority over the gods of Canaan.
This is the point that I want to make, and I think if we can grasp this, Exodus will become clearer in certain places. The book of Exodus assumes that these other gods exist, now we're saying right away, "Well, they don’t exist," yeah, I know, we know that. Now we read places like Jeremiah and Isaiah, these idols, they’re just lumps of wood. He’ll take a log, and with half, he'll fall down and worship it, and with the other half, he’ll make a fire and warm himself, and say, “Ah, I am warm,” that’s what Isaiah says. But I think God actually leads his people to that realization somewhat slowly, and then to the full realization that the Christians know in Christ, the real manifestation of who God is. Don’t forget that the Exodus community was made up of simple, ancient Near Eastern people who lived in a world entirely polytheistic, every nation had multiple gods. The way God speaks to them in their context is saying, "I will take care of these gods for you." Think of this as Israel’s theological infancy, they’re being catechized at an early age, and God explains things to them in ways that are understandable to their world view. So when I read fifteen eleven, "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord," I do not take that to be an exaggeration or hyperbole, just poetic flowery language. In that world, this meant something. In the Exodus community, what Moses is saying is that this desert-dwelling God who no one has ever heard of, he alone is God. He alone is worthy of worship, and he can take all the gods of the world and render them to nothing, Now to us that may seem weak theologically, but in that world, this was a powerfully polemically loaded statement to make. You're basically saying everybody is wrong and this desert dwelling God is the only right one, and I want to take that literally, and the reason why is because we are going to see this again when we talk about the ten commandments, which we will do next time.