

**THE TEN PLAGUES OF EGYPT – SOME REFLECTIONS ON RESPONSES TO
THE ARTICLE IN ISSUE 3 OF *OPTICON1826***

By Roger S. Wotton

I wrote an article in Issue 3 of *Opticon1826*, giving natural explanations for the ten Plagues of Egypt. My intention was to look at a section of an ancient religious text, question how the text came to be written and then give an interpretation of the events described. As I am a biologist, the ten Plagues of Egypt were an obvious choice as many of the ten were biological in nature (rivers turned to blood; fish killed; frogs; lice; beasts or flies; pestilence; boils; locusts). The plagues also seemed to fit a logical chronology based on the effect of weather patterns on the environment and on the life cycles of organisms. My source was the King James Bible and I tried to approach the text as though reading it for the first time. As it was more than 40 years since I had seen these chapters and verses, it was certainly the first time that I'd come to them as a professional biologist. Intentionally, I didn't want to read other interpretations on the ten Plagues as this would have coloured my attempt at objectivity.

One difference between my approach and that of a scholar in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition was that I left the theistic sections of the text on one side, covering only the descriptions of natural events. It was not my intention to suggest that a theistic explanation was unlikely and I made this explicit: 'Although I have put forward natural explanations of the events, I am not arguing that this is evidence against a supernatural power. If the ten Plagues of Egypt were planned, and delivered, by a god, the catalogue of disturbance is most impressive and the cumulative effect very powerful'.

The article was taken up by *The Times* and other newspapers around the world. *The Times* piece, written by Ruth Gledhill, had the headline: 'Plagues of Egypt "caused by nature, not God"' and *The Times'* online blog then carried a series of posts, spanning a spectrum of opinions, some of which were expressed in angry and emotional terms. So, why were there such strong responses to the article? Clearly, it was felt that I was promoting an atheistic interpretation. At the time of writing I was, indeed, an atheist and admitted this to Ruth Gledhill when we spoke on the telephone. However, I also stressed that some members of my family are Christians and I did not want the article to offend their religious views. No one can dispute the first section of *The Times'* headline, but the addition of 'not God' was just good journalism - good in the sense that it was provocative and likely to elicit a response, even if not accurate reporting.

As the article in *Opticon1826* touched on the power of religious fundamentalism in, I hope, a subtle and considered way, it was interesting to see how fundamentalists from all religions reacted. In addition to the comments on *The Times'* blog, I received several hostile letters and e-mails. The authors probably felt that there should be no questioning of the orthodoxies to which they adhered and they were clearly annoyed about something. Their conviction seemed to show the approach of those who believe that the winner of an argument is the person who shouts the loudest and/or has the last word. Perhaps this was their way of reinforcing their own beliefs, or maybe they felt threatened in some way?

It has always puzzled me that some believers need to proselytise their religious viewpoint in this way while others feel that it is a personal, reflective matter. Attempts to convert seem particularly overt in some branches of Christianity and Islam, and the practice has fuelled much conflict throughout history, especially when mixed with politics and national power. Maybe it was perceived that I was attacking religion in the article? Or perhaps it was thought that, as I was a biologist and an atheist, I must wish to force my views on others? Some atheists certainly seem to proselytise.

One measured response came from Jeffrey Phelps in Redding, California and the first paragraph of his entry in *The Times'* blog stated: 'I am a Christian of over 40 years and I read Professor Wotton's article and found no reason for *The Times'* headline. The professor is merely

stating scientific facts which I feel give even greater credence to and actually support the Biblical account'. Jeffrey had clearly read the article in *Opticon1826* (which was linked from *The Times*) and not just the headline in the newspaper which, I suspect, many felt reflected my position. Jeffrey gave the type of thoughtful response that I hoped for. Why can't we all have an open-minded approach to possible scientific interpretations of events in religious texts, without feeling the urge to push arguments for, or against, theism?

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I would like to thank Catherine Sebastian and Stephen Fleming for their very helpful editorial work.