

THE PLAGUES AGAINST EGYPT

Exodus 7 - 11

There are two times in history where the Old Testament writers direct our attention to where we see the great and powerful hand of the Lord at work. The first is in creation where the Lord spoke heaven and earth into existence. The second such time is at the exodus from Egypt when the Lord moved against what was the mightiest nation in the world and brought it to its knees.

THE ROYAL REPRESENTATIVE

Then the LORD said to Moses, “See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.” (Exodus 7:1).

Within the Egyptian religion, the Pharaoh of Egypt was the earthly incarnation and representation of the Egyptian god Osiris. He was worshiped as a god and temples of worship were built in his honor. Moses is sent to Pharaoh and Moses represents Yahweh to the Pharaoh.

Have you ever stopped to think that you are a representative of the God of the universe. You are the only representation of God some people will ever know in this life. Paul says that we are ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). We represent the Lord to the world.

AN INTENTIONAL HARDENING

“You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh that he let the sons of Israel go out of his land. ³ But I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. ⁴ When Pharaoh does not listen to you, then I will lay My hand on Egypt and bring out My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by great judgments. ⁵ The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from their midst.” (Exodus 7:2-5).

The Lord states His intention to harden the heart of Pharaoh. This is not the first time such an intention has been stated. God had already said the same thing back in Exodus

4:21. At the same time, we will read of instances in which Pharaoh hardens his own heart. It is interesting to note the progression.

God: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart."	Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 14:4; 14:17
Pharaoh's heart was hardened	Exodus 7:13; 7:22; 8:19; 9:7; 9:35
Pharaoh hardened his heart	Exodus 8:15; 8:32; 9:34
The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart	Exodus 9:12; 10:20; 10:27; 11:10; 14:8
God: "I have hardened Pharaoh's heart."	Exodus 10:1

Before we ever read of Pharaoh hardening his own heart, God states His intention to accomplish this hardening process. As that process is underway, we also see Pharaoh participating in the hardening process. It is not that he wished to obey God's command to free the people but was prevented by that hardening. Rather we see him hardening his own heart and only then do we see the clear statement that the Lord hardened his heart. Steve Brown correctly observes that "the Lord often greases the tracks in the direction we choose to travel."

THE AGES OF THE AMBASSADORS

Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three, when they spoke to Pharaoh (Exodus 7:7).

While we are inclined to hear that Moses was 80 years old and accept this as an approximate number that has been rounded up or down, it is more specific in the case of Aaron whom we are told was 83 years of age. This is heartening in our culture where youth is highly esteemed while those in old age are sometimes thought to have outlived their usefulness. At the age of 80, Moses was only now beginning his ministerial career.

THE MIRACLE OF THE STAFF

So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the LORD had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts. ¹² For each one threw down his staff and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³ Yet

Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exodus 7:10-13).

Moses and Aaron go into the presence of the Pharaoh and they perform an obvious miracle. Aaron throws down his staff and it turns into a serpent. I do not know how this was accomplished. Staffs do not regularly turn into serpents. The astounding thing is that the magicians of Egypt were able to duplicate this miracle. They threw their own staffs to the ground and they also turned into serpents.

What was the source of this power? Was their trickery involved, or was this a case of supernatural power on the part of the magicians? We do not know, but we cannot rule out the possibility that there was a true supernatural ability possessed by these magicians.

There is a lesson here. It is the lesson that all supernatural power and ability does not come from God. There is a spiritual conflict going on in the cosmos and its repercussions are manifest in the world in which we live.

This is important to know because there are some who claim supernatural power whose teachings do not accord with the scriptures. How are we to evaluate such teachings? Our evaluation is not based upon what they can do, but rather upon what they say.

THE PLAGUES

The plagues were God's judging hand against those who had enslaved and were persecuting His people. It has been suggested that many (if not all) of these plagues were directed against the false gods of Egypt.

- The Nile was worshiped.
- Heqt, the god of resurrection, took the form of a frog.
- Hathor, the mother-goddess, took the form of a cow. Bulls were also held sacred.
- Nut was the sky goddess.
- Isis was the goddess of life.
- Seth was the protector of crops.
- The sun was worshiped as the symbol of several different gods.
- The pharaoh was worshiped as a god.

While there may be some truth to this observation, the plagues do not emphasize these Egyptian deities in any order of importance and the scriptures do not make any specific reference to these particular gods. Instead we have a blanket statement in Numbers 33:4 that the Lord “executed judgment upon their gods.” A similar statement is made in Exodus 12:12 where it specifically refers to the judgment of the Passover.

PLAGUES	EFFECTS	INITIATOR
1-3	Loathsome.	Inflicted by hand of Aaron using the rod.
4-6	Painful.	Inflicted by the hand of the Lord.
7-9	Destructive beyond anything ever before experienced in Egypt.	Inflicted by the hand of Moses.

The first three plagues were suffered by both Egyptian and Israelite alike. But plagues 4-9 were only upon the Egyptians.

1. The Nile turned to Blood: *So Moses and Aaron did even as the LORD had commanded. And he lifted up the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood. ²¹ The fish that were in the Nile died, and the Nile became foul, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. And the blood was through all the land of Egypt (Exodus 7:20-21).*

- a. The significance of the miracle.

The Nile was the lifeline of Egypt. It was revered and worshiped as a god. The Nile gives life to Egypt as lungs and a heart give life to a body. Without the Nile, there would only be a desert wasteland. To turn the Nile into blood would be a catastrophe of enormous proportions.

- b. The duplication of the miracle: *But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exodus 7:22).*

The magicians were once again able to duplicate the miracle of the Lord through the use of their secret arts. They were not able to undo the miracle. They were not able to turn the blood of the Nile back into pure water. But there is no denying the potency of their ability.

- c. A lifeline of blood.

The turning of water into blood was a sign of judgment and death against the Egyptians. It has an echo in the New Testament where Jesus turned

water into wine, bringing to us a sign of grace and mercy.

As a result, we have a memorial today that commemorates the shedding of blood. I am speaking of the memorial of the Lord's supper. We remember that there is a lifeline of blood in the one who came and who took our judgment upon Himself. He was judged for us that we might enjoy God's grace and mercy.

2. The Plague of Frogs.

- a. A Picture of multiplication: *The Nile will swarm with frogs, which will come up and go into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed, and into the houses of your servants and on your people, and into your ovens and into your kneading bowls. (Exodus 8:3).*

The plague of frogs is described in terms of a "swarm." The term that is translated "swarm" (צָרָף) is used earlier in the book of Exodus to speak of the multiplication of the Israelites in the land. It is used in Exodus 1:7 when we read that "the sons of Israel were fruitful and **increased greatly**." As a result of that swarm of Israelites, the Pharaoh had attempted to exterminate the Israelites by putting their male children to death. Now in response to his treatment of God's people, he is plagued with a different sort of swarm. This is a swarm of frogs.

- b. A Picture of the Unclean.

Frogs are not known for their cleanliness. They are an animal that is regulated to living in swampy areas and eating bugs. It is no surprise that the book of Revelation describes three unclean spirits that are like frogs (Revelation 16:13).

- c. The Duplication by the Magicians: *The magicians did the same with their secret arts, making frogs come up on the land of Egypt (Exodus 8:7).*

Once again, the magicians of Egypt were able to duplicate the miracle of God. They were able to bring even more frogs upon the land, but they were powerless to get rid of the frogs that had come. The best they could do was to bring an additional curse upon the Pharaoh.

3. The Plague of Gnats: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats through all the*

land of Egypt. ’’ 17 They did so; and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff, and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats through all the land of Egypt. (Exodus 8:16-17).

One thing of which you will find a lot in Egypt is dust. There is sand and dust everywhere you turn. This is a picture, not merely of a few scattered gnats, but a plague of such creatures that reached epidemic proportions.

a. The Failure of the Magicians.

It was at this point that the magicians of Egypt had to admit failure. We read in Exodus 8:18 that *the magicians tried with their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not; so there were gnats on man and beast.* There was a limit to their power, even though that power thus far had only resulted in greater hardship against Egypt. It is at this point that the Egyptian magicians come to a stunning conclusion:

b. The Confession of the Magicians: *Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exodus 8:19).*

These magicians knew all about power and they recognized that the power that was being demonstrated by Moses and Aaron was far superior than their own dark arts. Their admission is that this is the “finger of God.”

This admission is echoed in the New Testament when Jesus confronts those who have set themselves up against Him and against His ministry. You recall the instance. He had performed many miracles including the casting out of a demon. His critics respond by suggesting this miracle was performed by the power of Satan. The reply of Jesus is striking:

“If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. 19 And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? So they will be your judges. 20 But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Luke 11:18-20).

Do you see it? Jesus suggests that he is casting out demons by the finger of God. He is demonstrating the same power that was demonstrated in Egypt through the hands of Moses and Aaron. They performed miracles by the finger of God and Jesus is also performing miracles by the finger of God.

In the case of Moses and Aaron, the pagan, unbelieving magicians of Egypt could recognize the finger of God. But the scribes and Pharisees who falsely accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan do not even have the spiritual insight that was demonstrated by those pagan magicians.

4. The Plague of Insects.

With the advent of this fourth plague, there is a distinction that had not been previously seen. It is a distinction between the land of Goshen where the Israelites lived and the rest of Egypt.

“But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where My people are living, so that no swarms of insects will be there, in order that you may know that I, the LORD, am in the midst of the land. ²³ I will put a division between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign will occur.” (Exodus 8:22-23).

From this time onward, there would be a distinction made between the land of Goshen and the rest of Egypt. The land of Goshen would be spared while the rest of Egypt would come under the full weight of the plagues.

5. The Plague of Pestilence against Cattle.

Cows were seen in Egypt as symbols of deity, just as the American Eagle is used in the United States as a national symbol. This plague would come against the cattle of Egypt, but it was not limited to cows. It also included donkeys and horses and camels and herds of sheep and of cows.

Once again, the distinction is made between those in Goshen and those throughout the rest of Egypt. The Israelites lose no cattle to this disease. I have no doubt that the price of healthy cattle skyrocketed and the Israelites made a huge profit in cattle shares.

6. The Plague of Boils: *Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Take for yourselves handfuls of soot from a kiln, and let Moses throw it toward the sky in the sight of Pharaoh. ⁹ It will become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and will become boils breaking out with sores on man and beast through all the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 9:8-9).*

This plague was an equal opportunity employer. It infected both man and animals. While we may assume that it was limited to the Egyptians and not upon the

Israelites, we are not specifically told this was the case.

The complete impotency of the magicians is seen in this plague when they themselves are infected. *The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians as well as on all the Egyptians (Exodus 9:11).*

7. The Plague of Hail.

The threat of hail must have been striking to the Egyptians. The land of Egypt is a dry land. It hardly ever rains in Egypt. The waters of the Nile come from far to the south and they flow through the dry desert.

Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt. (Exodus 9:23).

This was a thunderstorm of epic proportions. The thunder and lightning were such that it is describes as a storm of both hail and fire.

There was a place of safety. Because a warning had been given prior to the coming of this storm, those who heeded the warning had time to prepare by bringing their cattle indoors. This brings up a question. If the cattle of the Egyptians had been killed in the pestilence of the fifth plague, how did they now have cattle? There were several possible sources. Cattle may have been shipped down from Nubia or exported into the land from other areas. The closest such area was within their own domain. Cattle was available in Goshen, for the Israelites had been spared the devastation of the pestilence.

8. The Plague of Locusts.

We are specifically told that the hail destroyed the flax and the barley, but that the wheat had not yet ripened and so was spared by that devastation (Exodus 9:31-32). However, this was to be ruined by the plague of locusts that now descended upon Egypt.

Many years later, the prophet Joel would describe the devastation brought on Israel by a plague of locusts.

*What the gnawing locust has left, the swarming locust has eaten;
And what the swarming locust has left, the creeping locust has eaten;
And what the creeping locust has left, the stripping locust has eaten.*

(Joel 1:4).

This plague of locusts were the final straw. There was nothing left to eat in Egypt. The land that had been known as the breadbasket of the world was now laid waste.

It is during this time that the Pharaoh makes one of several attempts to negotiate a better deal. He has intermitantly made several offers. Each of these has been a call to compromise the command of the Lord.

- Sacrifice to God here in Egypt (8:25).
- Don't go very far away (8:28).
- Only the men can go (10:10-11).
- Don't take your flocks or herds (10:24).

The world always wants to negotiate away our faith and our obedience to the Lord. Negotiation is okay when you are speaking about employee and employer relations. It is not okay when you come to the Sovereign Lord of the universe.

The locusts only leave when they are driven away by a strong wind. Exodus 10:19 tells us, *So the LORD shifted the wind to a very strong west wind which took up the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea; not one locust was left in all the territory of Egypt.*

The normal word for “west” is the Hebrew **יָם**, normally translated “sea.” This was because the Mediterranean Sea lay to the west of Israel. In this case, the idea may have been a strong wind from the Sea. The Hebrew calls it a **רוּחַ יָם**, a sea-wind.

9. The Plague of Darkness.

The ninth plague involved a great darkness coming upon Egypt. This was the land where it never rained. It was the land of clear skies and sunshine. That sun now disappeared. The sun was worshipped as a god, but the sign of this god was obliterated.

So Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. 23 They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the sons of Israel had light in their dwellings. (Exodus 10:22-23).

The darkness that fell over Egypt was complete. This was no mere eclipse of the

sun. This was a darkness that even fire could not penetrate. It was a darkness that corresponded to the spiritual darkness in the heart of Pharaoh.

There was another time when darkness came over the land. It was a darkness that lasted, not for three days, but for three hours. During the time Jesus was upon the cross, Matthew 27:45 tells us that *from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour*. It was during this time that Jesus suffered the penalty of spiritual darkness. He suffered darkness in order to bring us into the light.

10. The Death of the Firstborn.

The Final Plague will be the most extreme of all. It will strike at the very heart of Pharaoh, for it will take away his firstborn son. We shall look at this plague in greater detail in the next chapter. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that this final plague was directed against the one who was deemed to be the manifestation of the god Osiris. The Pharaoh was considered to be a god and his son was the son of god.

It is fitting therefore that Jesus, the Son of God, is described in the New Testament as having become our passover. *Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. (1 Corinthians 5:7).*