

The Plagues

Exodus 7:8-10:29

(Note: this is designed to be a two part message. All Scripture from the English Standard Version. For the information on the Egyptian pantheon, David Livingstone's articles on the plagues were very helpful.)

Section One

The Egyptians lived in world populated by a denizen of gods and goddesses.

Against them, Yahweh lifts the arm of His power to demonstrate that He alone is God alone. *For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments -- I am the Lord.* (Exodus 12:12) *The Lord had also executed judgments on their gods.* (Numbers 33:4) The spokesmen for God face the priests of Egypt in the presence of the Pharaoh. Moses records this historic scene so that Israel will know for certain that the gods and idols of the world, even when empowered by Satan, are nothing in the face of the sovereign of the universe.

We live in a neo-pagan world where technophiles and the illiterate alike believe in the gods of science, aliens, mythologies and underworld powers. Even a cursory search of the internet on the Egyptian pantheon yields thousands of hits about the *contemporary* worship of the Egyptian gods. Neo-paganism preaches the powers of those earth-based gods and idols. Fertility cults depending on the ancient mythologies abound. By God's grace, we will be seeing people converted out of this kind of deep darkness as it becomes more and more prevalent in our culture.

It is over against this that the gospel comes. The cross is the ultimate judgment against the powers of this age. The resurrection is the grand demonstration of the glorious power of God. The exodus of redeemed people who are both the beneficiaries and the witness of the miraculous deliverance by the one and only God, the I AM.

A word about our approach in these messages on the plagues. We are going to allow the narrative of the text to carry the story line itself. The background of the Egyptian pantheon would have been familiar to Israelites, so that knowledge is assumed. But we will need to fill in some of that in order to see what is going on. And, I will also highlight some features and lessons from the text. Structurally, these plagues occur in three sets of three. Each set is introduced by the phrase, "And in the morning..." In the first three plagues, Aaron's rod is used. In the middle three plagues, no rod is used, only the word of Moses and Aaron. In the last three, Moses' rod is used. In the last plague of each set, there is no warning issued to Pharaoh; the plague is simply called forth. Since the slaughter of the first born (10th plague) occurred in April and the Nile normally flooded its banks in July-August, then these plagues probably covered around 9 months. Pharaoh seems almost to be toying with Moses and Aaron through his responses until he is broken in view of his priests and his people.

The Prologue – A Spiritual Battle

(7:8-13)

⁸ Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹ "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" ¹⁰ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. ¹² For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. ¹³ Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

Moses and Aaron, upon the Lord's command, enter the throne room of the Pharaoh. The contest begins. It is no mere contest between wills. As this prologue shows, the battle is one of supremacy. Is the pantheon of Egyptian gods with Pharaoh at its head supreme over the I AM?

In the Challenge to Prove Themselves

(v.8-9)

Pharaoh challenges Moses and Aaron to prove themselves by working a miracle. Remember, Pharaoh knows these two brothers, He knows they are just ordinary, educated men. But they would not have been initiates into the Egyptian mysteries. He fully expects them not to be able to do anything and thus will simply be able to dismiss them. The Pharaoh knows the satanic magical powers of his cultic priests. Make no mistake – what they do are not tricks or slights of hand. They are magic – the power to manipulate the physical world through the powers of the natural and spiritual. Spells and spirits are used to do wonders. Pharaoh is sure that these two Hebrews will appear utterly weak against the astonishing powers of his magician-priests.

In the Contest between Powers

(v.10-12)

Aaron throws down the staff and it turns into a serpent. This is a different word than used when the staff became a serpent in the wilderness. But it is often used to refer to a poisonous snake elsewhere in the Bible. The Pharaoh calls in his priest-magicians, Jannes and Jambres (2 Timothy 3:8) who duplicate the feat. Their staves also become snakes. This is attributed by Moses to magic powers, not to sleight-of-hand. But as the snakes slither across the elegantly tiled floor, Aaron's snake chases down and devours all the others.

Why is this so important? The Egyptian pharaohs are often portrayed with the ankh staff in their arms and the cobra-fronted miter on their heads. In their mythology, the cobra and ankh were mighty signs of power wielded only by the son of RA. Against this comes the shepherd's staff of power. Even in the snake, and probably a cobra at that, Aaron is demonstrating Yahweh's superiority. Imagine though the consternation of both priest and Pharaoh when their own serpents are supper for the God's cobra.



As one preacher aptly put it, “He was taking the symbol of the king’s majesty and making it crawl in the dust. This was a direct assault on Pharaoh’s sovereignty; indeed, it was an attack on Egypt’s entire belief system. To draw a modern comparison, it would be like taking a bald eagle into the Oval Office and wringing its neck. When God confronts other gods he does not probe around, hoping to find a weakness. Instead, he takes aim at his enemies’ greatest strength and overwhelms it with superior force. In this case, he sent Moses and Aaron straight to Pharaoh’s command center, where he proceeded to claim ultimate authority over all Egypt.” (P. Ryken, p.209)

In the Hardening of Pharaoh

(v.13)

But Pharaoh is not convinced. His heart is hardened. Notice, the passive voice. It does not say, “He hardened his heart.” It implies that his heart was hardened by someone else. Romans 9:17-18 tells us that God raised up this Pharaoh in order to show His power and that His name would be proclaimed. Therefore, God hardens whom He wills and shows mercy on whom He wills. This initial hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is God’s own work.

This will be the pattern that will unfold. God, through Moses and Aaron, will systematically demonstrate His sovereign superiority over the Egyptian idols. Listen to this prayer written to the Egyptian pantheon

*Praise to thee, O Nile, that issueth from the earth and cometh to nourish Egypt . . . That watereth the meadows, he that Ra hath created to nourish all cattle. That giveth drink to the desert places, which are far from water . . . When the Nile floodeth, offering is made to thee, cattle are slaughtered for thee, a great oblation is made for thee . . . Offering is also made to every other god, even as is done for the Nile, with incense, oxen, cattle, and birds upon the flame . . . All ye men, extol the Nine Gods, and stand in awe of the might which his son, the Lord of All, hath displayed, even he that maketh green the Two Riverbanks. Thou art verdant, O Nile, thou art verdant. He that maketh man to live on this cattle, and his cattle on the meadow . . .” (Adolph Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians*, 1966, p. 146.)*

In this prayer, the *Nine Gods* are to be extolled. Well, in what follows, the nine gods of Egypt’s pantheon are smashed by Yahweh, the one and only true God.

River Water to Blood

(7:14-25)

¹⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.

¹⁵ Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. ¹⁶ And you shall say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness. But so far, you have not obeyed.” ¹⁷ Thus says the LORD, “By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. ¹⁸ The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.”’ ¹⁹ And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’”

With exquisite timing, Moses and Aaron are sent to meet the Pharaoh at the time of His morning worship and bath. He enters the water as the god who provides

for the land of Egypt. What they are to say and to do is given in good detail. They are to declare the Lord's purpose, to show the He is the LORD. They are to demonstrate the Lord's power by striking the waters of the Nile. They will turn to blood. They are to stretch the rod out over the waters of the whole country. They will turn into blood.

This plague was against the god Hapi, spirit of the Nile in flood and "giver of life to all men." The annual flooding of the Nile was called "the arrival of Hapi". He was especially worshipped at Gebel Silsileh and Elephantine. The water of the Nile was the transformed life-blood of Osiris. The fact that the Nile turned to blood was a direct affront to one of their chief gods. Although the fish-goddess was Hatmeyt, all the fish in the Nile River died.



²⁰ Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. ²¹ And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. ²² But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. ²³ Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. ²⁴ And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile. ²⁵ Seven full days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile.

See the Pharaoh standing in the midst of the Nile as it turns to blood. Imagine throughout the land of Egypt, the people watch in horror as their water pots, wells and cisterns are filled with blood. They run to the Nile to see it red and stinking with dead fish. Where is Hapi now? Has the god died so that his blood flows instead of the life-giving water? What about Hatmeyt? Can she save the carcasses of fish putrefying as they float on the stench of a river of crusting blood? For one week, the people seek for water and see the demise of their god. But Pharaoh does not even take it to heart.

Sleeping with the Frogs

(8:1-15)

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. ² But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your country with frogs. ³ The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. ⁴ The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants.'" ⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals and over the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt!'" ⁶ So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. ⁷ But the magicians did the same by their secret arts and made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.

God sends Moses and Aaron to warn Pharaoh of what will happen next if he will not let Israel go. From out of the Nile would swarm frogs over the whole land. Everywhere there would be frogs. Frogs in their streets; frogs in their houses; frogs in their ovens; frogs in their beds. They can walk with, live with, eat with and sleep with the frogs.

The Egyptians believed the frog was the symbol of the life-giving power-goddess, Hekt. Hekt was represented in paintings as a woman with the head of a frog. Hers was one of the oldest fertility cults in Egypt. She was the goddess who oversaw the women, the mid-wives, who helped women have babies. She was thought to blow the breath of life into the nostrils of the new babies. Her husband, Khnum, was the god who made the bodies of babies on the potter's wheel from the dust of the ground. So, Jannes and Jambres are able to duplicate the miracle. Wonder what people thought about their duplicating the miracle. Why don't they show their power by reversing the miracle? But Satan is ever the provoker, the imitator and deceiver.



⁸ Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Plead with the LORD to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD." ⁹ Moses said to Pharaoh, "Be pleased to command me when I am to plead for you and for your servants and for your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile." ¹⁰ And he said, "Tomorrow." Moses said, "Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God. ¹¹ The frogs shall go away from you and your houses and your servants and your people. They shall be left only in the Nile." ¹² So Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh, and Moses cried to the LORD about the frogs, as he had agreed with Pharaoh. ¹³ And the LORD did according to the word of Moses. The frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. ¹⁴ And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. ¹⁵ But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron, pleading with them to intervene with the LORD to get rid of the frogs. He will let the people go, tomorrow. Like so many people, he will do what God wants, *tomorrow*. He hates the consequences of his

choices. This is vain regret, not true repentance. But it looks like repentance. So upon Pharaoh's word, Moses and Aaron promise that the frogs will all be gone except in the Nile where they are supposed to be.

So Moses intercedes with the LORD. God answers his prayer. The frogs all begin to die. They gather them up and stack them in great heaps everywhere. The stench of the bloody Nile is now rotten with the reek of dead frogs all over Egypt.

Hekt, the fertility goddess could not control the fertility of a these frogs! Pharaoh could do little himself. Through this plague their frog god became a stench to the Egyptians.

Common Dust into Gnats

(8:16-19)

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.'" ¹⁷ And they did so. 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 in all the land of Egypt. ¹⁸ The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. ¹⁹ Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.



With no warning to Pharaoh, God commands Moses and Aaron, with the outstretched rod, to bring forth gnats from the dust, the earth. We do not know exactly what kind of pest these were. But these were a flying, biting and troublesome pest that soon covered everything, man and beast. Now Jannes and Jambres, the cultic priests, are stymied. They cannot reproduce this. They do not have the power that their primal god, Geb, had.

As the god of earth, Geb represented the fertile Nile valley, and is often depicted as dark brown (the color of the flood plains), or green (the color of vegetation). It was believed that his loud laughter was the cause of earthquakes. His sacred animal is the goose. Geb was one of the most ancient of the Egyptian gods and goddesses. This can be seen in the more elemental and primal attributes that he, his parents and his wife all embodied. It was he who - with Nut, his sister - sired Osiris, Isis, Set and Nephthys, who become the later pantheon of gods.

Ah, the wisdom of God! He demonstrates that He can do what Geb cannot. God is the LORD of the earth. But Geb cannot even produce such a small creature as a gnat, much less the mighty gods he is supposed to have fathered. For Yahweh, producing gnats from the ground is a small thing when you think that He created man from the dust. The LORD's prophets, with an outstretched rod, bring forth life out dust. But the magician-priests cannot. Even they must finally admit that "This is the finger of God." Only the true God can make dust live.

What a terrible sequence of plagues! First your water becomes putrid blood. Then you are eating and sleeping with slimy frogs. Now you and your beasts are covered all day and all night long with gnats. Think what it would be like to be covered with mosquitoes all day and all night.

Pharaoh will listen to no one. He is deaf to Moses and Aaron. He turns away from the grudging affirmation of his priests. His heart is becoming stone. He will not relent. His doom is sure even as Israel's deliverance is certain.

Conclusion

Section One

God is God alone. There is no other. All others are false gods. All others are idolatries. Many things are worshipped today as in the old days. Many things are worshipped today that are not commonly thought of as idols. But God will have no competitor in your heart for His affection and His authority. He is LORD over all.

When God wants to establish his throne in a sinner's heart, He makes his attack right at the source of the sinner's strength. If we crave power, God's Spirit will show us how weak we are. If we live for pleasure, he will make us so miserable that the more we get what we want, the unhappier we become. If we think life is all about making money, he will take away our financial security. Whatever gods we happen to worship, the Holy Spirit will confront them head-on. People often see their need for Christ when what they are counting on is shown that it cannot be trusted. (Adapted from P. Ryken, p.209)

God has brought to nothing Satan and the gods of this world. Egypt's pantheon crumbles beneath the finger of God Almighty, the IAM. His human enemies are at His sovereign mercy. Satan has been decisively defeated. His sentence of death is just waiting a short time until his eternal incarceration in the lake of fire.

The judgment of God is a fierce and frightening thing. It is aimed right at where we worship and at our idols. He will deal with our idolatry. He will move against our sin. He will not be trifled with and will not stand challenged. The present pangs of the curse will little compare to the future horrors that await in the outpouring of the wrath of God in time and in eternity.

God has sent us the mediator like Moses, the Lord Jesus Christ. He has stood between us and the mighty, holy and fearsome wrath of God. Jesus has taken that wrath and judgment for us. Will you perish in Egypt, in this world? Or will you hear and heed His call, His call to believe in the gospel and to bow to Him? Will you call on Him today?

