

Lamar E. Cooper, Sr.
Executive Vice President & Provost
Criswell College

The First Nine Plagues of Egypt

Exodus 7:1 to 10:29

Part 1 - Plagues 1-3, 7:1-8:19

Introduction

God ignores the statement of Moses in 6:30, which says, "I am a man of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh heed me?" Moses forgot that the only reason he was alive was that God had rescued him from the mandated infanticide legislated by Ahmose I. One cannot read Exodus 2:1-10 without a deep impression of God's providence at work in the life of Moses' mother, his sister Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter. All of them worked in tandem to preserve the life of Moses. Moses also ignored God's response when he first mentioned his reluctance based on his inability to speak, see 4:10. God's answer was irrefutable, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord (*Yahweh*)? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say," 4:11-12.

Therefore, the need for further discussion on this matter was irrelevant, and God did not even respond. Stephen, in his sermon of Acts 7, said that Moses was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds," Acts 7:22. This picture also is consistent with Moses' own prophetic words in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19, that "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, and from your brethren, Him you shall hear." Luke paraphrases this prophecy and applied it to Jesus in Luke 24:19. In the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Moses "protests too much." I believe even he knew that his speech pattern was not the problem, but it was his lack of confidence and commitment to the assignment, so God finally goes on with the plan and no longer responds to Moses' lame excuse. The matter never came up again.

Finally! Moses Did What God Commanded, 7:1-7

Verses 1-2. This is reminiscent of the promise of "signs" in Exodus 4:9, 17, and 28, that God gave to Moses and Aaron. God told Moses that he would speak as His mouthpiece and would therefore be as a God to Pharaoh. He was to speak all things that God commanded him, especially the demand to allow the Hebrews to leave Egypt. But Moses was forewarned that Pharaoh would not let them go, 7:1-2. This is the last time we hear any objection from the lips of Moses. He went on to become all that God intended for him to be. He was not perfect, but he made a staggering impact on the world of his day. But more than that, his influence and contribution in recording

the word that God gave him, especially the Ten Commandments, became the basis for civil government for all nations to this present day.

Lesson

Obedience to God not only has immediate rewards and consequences, there also are long-term benefits. It is doubtful that Moses ever knew the far-reaching implications of the ministry he had in Egypt leading up to Sinai and the Ten Commandments. Moses was neither the first nor the last to make a gigantic impact for God in his lifetime.

Verses 3-7. God had already warned Moses that Pharaoh would not respond. Both the Hebrews and the Egyptians were on the brink of experiencing just who *Yahweh* was. Every person will ultimately "know" the Lord by an intimate, personal relationship with Him. What most people do not understand is that there may be two totally different kinds of experiences that fulfill this promise. We may know Him by faith as Savior and Redeemer. But we may also know Him in judgment as the Just and Righteous Judge of every person.

The prediction of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in verse 3 is a restatement of Exodus 4:13 (review the full discussion in the note on 4:21). The following is an excerpt and conclusion from the earlier discussion in the notes on Exodus 4:21 in the conclusion of a discussion surrounding the question, "Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?" A review of this issue is appropriate here.

Having said all this, the question remains, Did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Or Did Pharaoh harden his own heart? The answer is YES! The answer lies in understanding the balance between God's sovereign will and human freedom to make choices of our own. It was Yahweh, the God of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who sent His self-revelation to Moses and to Pharaoh through Moses. The same light of truth that caused Moses to yield and obey, caused Pharaoh to stiffen and become all the more unyielding. The same miracles that convinced the Hebrews of Moses' authority and leadership ability made Pharaoh all the more obstinate and convinced that he alone was the authority in control. Is it not amazing that the same light of the sun that hardens a ball of damp clay, will melt a ball of firm wax. It is the basic nature of the material that makes the response different for each substance. So it is with people. The same light of truth from the Word of God will convict and cause the will of one person to yield, and will also cause another to stiffen, rebel, and refuse to yield to the will of God. Each responds to God's truth in ways consistent with his own will and nature.

In addition, God added that He would "multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt," v. 3b. As Moses was told in God's first appearance to him,

"Pharaoh will not heed you," see 3:19-20. There is a twofold purpose in the plan of God. First, Pharaoh will not listen, "so that I may lay My hand on Egypt and bring my armies and My people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments," v. 4b. Second, it also is God's purpose that the Egyptians know who He, *Yahweh*, is and what He can do. This they will know "when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the children of Israel from among them," v. 5.

It is stated matter-of-fact, "Moses and Aaron did so; just as the Lord commanded them, so they did," v. 6. As stated earlier, neither Moses nor Aaron ever again presented excuses to God. Moses was eighty years old when he went before Pharaoh, and his older brother Aaron was eighty-three.

Lesson

When we are obedient to God, it allows Him to multiply our effectiveness and even to increase our resources beyond what we would think or hope. God makes it clear that living the life, doing His will, and answering and fulfilling His call are impossible without His help, read Rom 8:1-39 in this regard.

Prelude to the Plagues, 7:8-13

As a prelude to the "signs and wonders," God sent Moses and Aaron for a demonstration before Pharaoh. God told them to appear before Pharaoh and cast down Aaron's rod, and let it become a serpent; so they did so, v. 8-9. Pharaoh seemed unimpressed. He call his own magicians and they duplicated Aaron's demonstration with their "enchantments," vv. 10-11. Both they and Aaron threw down their rods and everyone's rod became a serpent, but Aaron's serpent-rod swallowed up all the rods of the magicians, v. 12. But just as God predicted, Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he ignored their demonstration, v 13.

Introduction to the Plagues of Egypt

The first plague begins in 7:14 and the last of the first nine, before the death of the firstborn, which we shall study separately, ends in 10:29. There are some unique and interesting factors that may be observed in a careful analysis of the first nine plagues. There are three cycles of three plagues. In each cycle the first and second of the three plagues follow a warning given to Pharaoh. The third plague in the cycle follows without warning and no meeting with Pharaoh. Also, before the first plague in each cycle, Moses meets with Pharaoh outdoors, while before the second plague he meets with Pharaoh indoors. This shows a symmetry and order that rules out the kind of chance occurrence that some liberal scholars have suggested, see U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. by Israel Abrahams, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967, pp. 92-93.

Plagues as a means of divine judgment are found elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. This would not be the first time God sent plagues against Egypt. You will recall that God plagued Pharaoh, in the time of Abraham, because of his advances toward Sarah, Gen 12:17. God brought plagues against the Philistines when they abducted the Ark of the Covenant, and they concluded this was just like the plagues of Egypt, 1 Sam 4:8. Jeremiah and Hosea also mention plagues as judgments, see Jer 19:8; 49:17; 50:13; Hosea 13:14. The psalmists make reference to the plagues of Egypt in Psalm 78:43-51 and 105:28-36, which are summary accounts. In Revelation, there are many analogous similarities between the plagues of Egypt and those in Revelation, especially in chapters 8, 9, and 16. Just like Pharaoh's stubborn resistance, the text says that the people refused to repent and no one gave glory to God, see Rev 9:21; 16:9, 11, and the term "plague" as a judgment of God is mentioned in Revelation 9:18, 20; 11:6; 15:1, 6, 8; 16:9; 18:4, 8; 21:9; and 22:18.

Liberal scholars who downplay the supernatural in Scripture like to point out that many of the phenomena that occurred in the plagues of Exodus could easily be categorized as natural occurrences. While it is true that many of the plagues can be explained by natural phenomena, it also is true that they are not things that happen on demand at a set time and set place as they do in Exodus. These signs and wonders were interpreted as the mighty acts of God by Moses and the Hebrews, and eventually by Pharaoh. There are five aspects of the plagues that set them apart as supernatural revelation.

1. Prediction - Each plague was predicted prior to its occurrence. Moses predicted both the arrival and departure of each plague, 7:15-16; 8:10, 23; 9:5, 18, 29; 10:4, 21-22.
2. Intensification - While plagues like the frogs, insects, cattle diseases, and darkness all were well-known phenomena to the Egyptians, the occurrences of these particular plagues were not only as predicted in time, but they were more intense than normal plagues to a degree that ruled out any ordinary coincidence.
3. Discrimination - The plagues were specially aimed at the gods of Egypt, Pharaoh, and the Egyptian populace. There are specific statements that at least some, if not all, of the plagues, did not affect the Hebrews, 8:22; 9:4, 26.
4. Progression - From the first plague to the tenth, there is an easily identifiable progression of severity and intensification that rules out chance events.
5. Moral Purpose - These were not arbitrary judgments designed as inconveniences, but they were specifically chosen to expose the helplessness of the gods of Egypt and the person of Pharaoh. Therefore, the plagues themselves were for the purpose of teaching a moral and spiritual lesson about the power and majesty of *Yahweh*, the one true God of the Hebrews, see

Joseph Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, Wheaton: Van Kamper Press, 1950, pp. 92-93.

While there are other purposes identifiable within the context of each plague passage, the above demonstrate that God was moving in a mighty way to show that history is not governed by chance, or by the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful nation under heaven. As Moses encountered Pharaoh, the king of Egypt seems to be invincible. But in the end of this demonstration of signs and wonders, it is *Yahweh*, the God of the Hebrews, who prevails by His sovereignty, power, and majesty.

Lesson

Simply put, the wages of sin is not only discomfoting, the wages of sin is death, Rom 6:23. These plagues were not just a frivolous nuisance inflicted by God. They were designed to show that ultimately disobedience of God's commands lead to pain, death, and the forfeiture of life everlasting.

The First Plague: A Judgment on the Gods of the Nile, 7:14-24

The gods of the Nile River rank at the top of the Egyptian pantheon of gods. Hapi is the god of the Nile, although the foremost expert on the gods of Egypt, E. A. Wallis Budge, states that the meaning of the term "Nile-god" has not yet been satisfactorily explained. What we know is that Hapi was closely associated with Osiris and his wife Isis, Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians, Volume II*, New York: Dover Publications, 1969, pp. 42-48. He is known as the father of gods. By striking the Nile, God and Moses would strike at the origins, the heart, and the power structure of Egyptian worship. This made a statement that the oldest and most powerful gods of Egypt could not restrain or repulse *Yahweh*, the one true God of the Hebrews.

Verses 7-18. Moses was instructed to go to Pharaoh in the morning when he goes out to the Nile and meet with him, vv. 14-15. God gave him specific instructions. First, Moses was to tell Pharaoh that he was sent to him by *Yahweh*. Second, he was to reaffirm God's demand, "Let My people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness," v. 16. Third, "I [Moses] will strike the waters which are in the river with the rod that is in my hand, and they shall be turned into blood," v. 17. Fourth, the fish will die and the water will stink and become undrinkable, v. 18. All of these things were to demonstrate *Yahweh's* power over the river and the Nile-gods.

Verses 19-23. In addition to the waters of the Nile turning to "blood," which probably refers to the color and appearance rather than literal body fluid, Aaron was told to stretch out his rod and hand "over the streams and all pools of water, that they may become blood," and even water in wooden buckets and stone pitchers were all affected by this miracle, vv. 19-20. As a result of this miracle, which apparently

was instantaneous, though some argue it was red dirt that came from somewhere near the headwaters of the River. The text may refer to the color, but it is definitely not a dirt red color as suggested by some interpreters. The Hebrew word דָּם, *dam*, literally means "blood," and it is used five times in this chapter. It is interesting that Cecil B. DeMille in his movie, *The Ten Commandments*, took this literally, and the rivers actually congealed like blood. DeMille chose Dr. W. A. Criswell to be an advisor on this project and sent Dr. Criswell a copy of the screenplay that in is Dr. Criswell's personal library, which has been recreated at the Criswell College.

The use of "blood" in this first plague certainly leads one to see its Christological overtones. It is a portent of things to come in the last plague, namely the blood of the Passover. Nonetheless, it is the blood that brings life, for by His blood we have redemption. To reject the blood sacrifice of Christ is to invite eternal judgment, John 3:18. It is the redeeming power of God's grace that keeps on cleansing us by the blood of the Lamb, 1 John 1:7-9; Hosea 13:14. Jesus called His self-sacrifice the "blood of the covenant shed for many, for the remission of sins," Matt 26:28. The Jewish leaders invoked a curse on themselves, as do all others who refuse the saving grace of Jesus' sacrifice for the sins of all who will receive Him, see Matt 27:25.

The text suggests it was blood, but it is not clear if it was literal blood or the color of blood. The effect was immediate and catastrophic. All the fish in the river died, and the water of the river was undrinkable, which might mean that it did not congeal. The point of the miracle was that blood, as a judgment, was spread all over Egypt, vv. 20-21. Next we learn that Pharaoh's magicians duplicated the miracle by means of their "enchantments," Hebrew שֵׁמֶט, which literally means "secret arts." We do not know how or where they obtained untainted water for their demonstration. Perhaps it was not real water, which would have been part of their deception. Paul knew the names of the two magicians that performed this *faux* miracle and mentions them in 2 Timothy 3:8 as Jannes and Jambres who were like "those who resist the truth," and that they were "men of corrupt minds." This confirms that what the magicians did was in fact slight-of-hand and actually a fake version of the miracle demonstrated by Aaron and Moses. It also strongly suggests that this demonstration, along with their *faux* miracle with the snake-staffs in 7:11, may have involved demonic powers. Nevertheless, this demonstration further hardened the heart of Pharaoh and he returned to his palace, vv. 22-23.

Verses 24-25. The people of Egypt had to dig for water in and around the river. These events span a period of seven days. It is not totally clear whether the plague ended after seven days, or whether the search for drinkable water continued for seven days. The point is made that the whole land was disaffected, and the miracle now gained the attention of all the people, not just Pharaoh. The Egyptians were known

for their cleanliness. According to Herodotus, the notable Greek historian, "They were religious far beyond any other race of men. They wear linen garments [Exod 9:31], which they are especially careful to have always freshly washed. The priests shave their whole body every other day that no *lice* or other impure thing may adhere to them. . . . They bathe twice every day in cold water, and twice each night," *Herodotus II, 36, 37*, trans. by George Rawlinson, New York: Washington Square Press, 1963, pp. 88-89.

Lesson

The Nile River was the source of life and food for Egypt. The message of this plague is enormous. God struck at the source of everything Egyptian. The Nile was Egypt. Without it there was no hope of life in the land. Egypt was, and still is, a desert land bisected by a ribbon of green, arable, fertile land on both sides of the Nile that is the source of life. But God makes it clear that He, who is the source of everlasting life, has the power to take both the physical and spiritual life of persons who refuse to serve Him, Rom 6:23. Jesus came with redemptive grace and shed His blood for the remission of sins for all who believe, Heb 9:22.

The Second Plague: The Land Filled with Frogs, 8:1-15

Seven days after the first plague was administered, Moses and Aaron were instructed to return to Pharaoh with the announcement and implementation of the second plague, which was the plague of frogs. E. A. Wallis Budge notes that the frog was worshipped in earliest times in Egypt as the symbol of generation, birth, and fertility. The goddess, Heket, was represented by the frog and her male counterpart was Amen. This worship cult was one of the oldest in Egypt and was considered to have played an important part in the creation of the world. The frog was considered to be an imperfectly formed human being because it was generated from the slime of the river, see Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Vol. II, pp. 378-379.

Verses 1-5. Moses and Aaron were told to go to Pharaoh and once again demand the release of the Hebrew people. The consequences for not doing so would be that the river would bring forth frogs in abundance. This suggests that the river may have returned to some semblance of normalcy. The frogs would spill over into homes, into the bedroom, the bed, into the servants' homes, and into the ovens. God authorized Aaron to stretch forth his hands and make it happen even before appearing to Pharaoh.

Verses 6-11 The success of this plague was instantaneous. It also was duplicated by the magicians of Egypt, although it is unclear how they determined whose frogs belonged to whom. Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and asked that they make a supplication to *Yahweh* to take away this plague, with the promise that he would release the Hebrews as requested, vv. 6-8. Moses and Aaron inquired as to exactly

when Pharaoh wanted them to pray to *Yahweh* for relief. He replied, "tomorrow!" So they answered, "Let it be according to your word, that you may know that there is no one like *Yahweh* our God," v. 9. It has been noted that Pharaoh did not ask for immediate relief. This is a not-so-subtle clue that Pharaoh did not want to admit any emergency and was willing to spend one more night with the frogs, vv. 10-11.

Lesson

There have been sermons and at least one gospel song on this theme that depicts human willingness to endure the hardship of sin, even when convicted, rather than submit to God immediately, vv. 10-11.

Pharaoh Relents, 8:12-14

"The heart is deceitfully wicked above all things, who can know it?" (Jer 17:9). While Pharaoh told them he would grant their request (see verse 8), when the plague was cancelled, he changed his mind, hardened his heart, and did not keep his word. Even while the heaps of dead frogs were being gathered and the land was permeated with the stench, Pharaoh, having pledged his obedience, relented. It is a solemn reminder that even though we sometimes intend to do the right thing, our own heart and will causes us to turn away from the right thing to our own rebellion. As Walter Kaiser so appropriately says, "Men do not often learn the righteousness of God when He grants them His mercy and His favor (Ps 78:34-42; Isa 26:10)."

Lesson

"He who is often rebuked, *and hardens his neck*, Will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy," Proverbs 29:1. The times of hardened rebellion in the heart of Pharaoh are mounting as each chapter unfolds. A person who consistently hardens his heart against the clearly revealed will of God is headed for irreparable and final destruction. This was a hard lesson that the Philistines learned and Samuel records in 1 Samuel 6:6, "Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When He did mighty things among them, did they not let the people go, that they might depart?" see Heb 3:15; 4:7; Ps 95:8.

The Third Plague: Gnats, 8:16-19

The third plague came without warning or announcement as with the previous plagues. Moses gave instructions to Aaron to stretch forth his rod as before and implement this third plague. Since Pharaoh had failed to keep his word, there is no appearance before the implementation of the next judgment from God.

Verses 16-17. God gave Moses instruction that Aaron stretch forth his rod as before and strike the dust of the earth. The dust then turned into gnats, Hebrew קִנִּים, *kinnim*, for gnats. The word occurs five times in this passage and nowhere else.

This accounts for various translations, including "lice" and "mosquitoes." The translation as "lice" is based on the Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. Gnats are not particularly annoying to humans today because we have closed windows and window screens to keep out insects. Windows in homes of the Ancient Near East were open, leaving a home susceptible to insect invasions. If you have been on a farm, you have seen gnats attack animals around the eyes. While they are discomforting, they are not a huge problem, unless there was a major infestation such as the one described in verse 17.

Aaron struck the land and the dust of the ground turned into gnats. It would be hard to overemphasize the bountiful dust that envelopes the Middle East. If there were such an infestation, it would not only affect the ability of men and animals to see, but also to breathe. This plague that involved the "dust" of the ground was a judgment against the Egyptian god Seb, a very prominent part of the pantheon. He was the father of Osiris and is sometimes referred to as Geb or Keb. He is the god of the surface of the earth from which come plants, trees, herbs, and grain, see Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Volume II, p. 94-98. As a judgment from *Yahweh*, instead of producing food and shade, the dust was producing swarms of gnats to attack plant, animal, and human life, and Seb, the supposed god of the earth, was unable to stop it.

Verses 18-19. Not only could it not be stopped, but also Pharaoh's magicians tried to duplicate this miracle judgment as they had done before only to discover that they could not do so by their "enchantments." They realized that what Moses and Aaron were doing was not the slight-of-hand variety of tricks they were used to performing, v. 18. But amazingly they state, "this is the finger of God," v. 19. This was clear admission on their part that this plague was a supernatural act of God, see Exod 31:18 and Deut 9:10, where the same phrase is used to refer to a supernatural movement of *Yahweh*. Seb, the god of the earth, was helpless in the face of this plague. In Egyptian mythology, Seb worked in tandem with Shu, the god of the sky, and Nut, the god of the watery abyss under the earth and the waters of the sky as well, see Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Volume II, p. 98.

Lesson

1. The psalmist wrote, "The earth is the Lord's [*Yahweh's*], and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein. For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it on the waters [literally rivers]," Ps 24:1-2. This demonstration of the third plague was so powerful that the magicians of Egypt had to admit that the God of the Hebrews had the upper hand on Seb, Shu, and Nut, see Ps 78:42-45.
2. The reason for the helplessness of the gods of Egypt was simple. They did not exist! God later said to Moses, "Now see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me," Deut 32:39a.