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The First Nine Plagues of Egypt

Exodus 7:1 to 10:29

Part 2 - 8:16-9:12, Plagues 4—6

Introduction

The battle between Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh continues with the next group of three plagues. This actually is a battle between *Yahweh*, the one true living God of the Hebrews, and the false idols and non-existent gods of Egyptian worship. Therefore, there is no contest.

The Fourth Plague: The Swarms, 8:20-32

This plague presents the first of the next cycle of three plagues. The features of this plague are reminiscent of the first plague, 7:14-16, in that it begins outdoors and in the morning. We have no indication of how long each plague lasted before the next one came. It seems likely that after some passage of time, each plague subsided and a new plague was initiated.

Verses 20-21. Moses and Aaron were told to get up early in the morning and present themselves once again to Pharaoh. They were to repeat the now familiar refrain, "Let my people go, that they may serve me," v. 20. Then the next plague is described. "If you will not let my people go I will send swarms of flies on your people and into your houses," v. 21. You should notice that the word "flies" is in italics, which means that it was added for "clarification," but it is not in the original text. The text literally reads "I will send swarms on you and your servants," but does not specify what insects are in the swarms. The Hebrew word is עָרֹב 'arob, which means a swarm of insects, and it is used five times in Exodus 8:21, 22, 24, 29, 31 and also in Psalm 78:45 and 105:31 in reference to this event. Stuart translates this phrase as, "various kinds of annoying biting and non-biting insects in huge swarms," *Exodus, The New American Commentary*, p. 214. Verse 21 says that the swarms will be in the houses and cover the ground suggesting perhaps a larger insect than the gnat. Locust plagues were a familiar form of judgment noted by the prophets, and will be the subject of the tenth plague, Exod 10:4; Deut 28:2; 1 Kgs 8:37; 2 Chron 6:28; 7:13; P 105:34; Jer 51:14, 27; Nahum 3:15, 17.

George A. F. Knight believes that this plague may refer to a specific insect that would have represented a great victory for Yahweh and would have been a decisive blow to Egypt's pride. He presents one of the most incisive discussions of verses 20-21. Knight says: "There is a variety of beetle that occasionally settles by the

millions on Egypt, which then gnaws both man and beast, destroys clothes, furniture, and plants. Babies and invalids are not able to defend themselves from its attack," George A. F. Knight, *Theology as Narration*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, Publishing Company, 1976, p. 63.

Kaiser notes that the name in Hebrew, עֲרֹב 'arob, bears close resemblance to the word scarab, see, *Exodus, Exposition's Bible Commentary*, p. 355. Insects are not prominent in Egyptian religion but there is one exception. The beetle, known as Scarabaeidae, commonly known as the scarab beetle or dung beetle plays a prominent role in Egyptian theology. The beetle was the earthly representative of Khepera. These insects may be seen today. They form balls from animal dung and roll them to a chosen location to plan their eggs and bury the balls. In Egyptian lore it was the sacred scarab that rolled the sun disk, represent Amun Ra, the sun god, across the sky each day. These were plentiful in the hot dry climate of the Ancient Near East. The sacred scarab was associated with the idea of new birth and resurrection. When rolling the dung the scarab always faced the east, while rolling the ball westward. The ball is buried for 28 days and on the 29th day opens the ball, casts it into water and the eggs hatch, see Budge, pp. 370-382.

Verses 22-24. From this explanation the text turns to the limitation of this plague. All Egypt will be affected except for the land of Goshen, where the Hebrews live. God said, "I will make a difference between My people and your people," v. 23. "Thick swarms" of these insects came into the palace, the homes of the people, and covered the land everywhere but in Goshen. Egypt was covered with these swarming insects and "the land was corrupted because of the swarms," v. 24. The land is personified and refers to Egypt and all its population, Stuart, *Exodus*, p. 216.

Lesson

If indeed these insects were scarbs, a sacred symbol of royalty in Egypt, it was a powerful demonstration of *Yahweh's* power over His creation. This also was another very obvious indictment of Khepera, the god of life and the renewer of life, including the resurrection. Khepera was powerless in the face of the plague of the sacred beetle that was his symbol. Also, the sun god Amun Ra was dependent on the sacred beetle to move the sun disk across the sky. This plague was a demonstration of the powerlessness of pagan deities, rituals, and religion to produce life, to protect life, to renew life or in any way affect life. *Yahweh* was not going after the insignificant elements of Egyptian worship, but at the heart of it. All attempts to make life better, to preserve it, to protect it, by whatever means a person chooses is futile. False, non-existent gods of clay, wood, stone, or metal, cannot help us, only God in Christ is our redemption and salvation assured.

Pharaoh's Response, 8:25-32

Verse 25-27 The response of Pharaoh was designed to placate Moses and assuage the God of the Hebrews. His response was a compromise, "Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land," v. 25. Moses' quick reply pointed out that this would not be possible. Such a move would be detestable to the Egyptians. There were at least 1200 gods in the Egyptian pantheon. Every little village had its own patron god. All of them were in some way tied to the animals of the land. Anubis was the jackal. Apis was the bull. Hathor was the hawk. Sebek was the crocodile. Every little village venerated some animal. The idea of killing any animal as a sacrifice to the gods was totally repulsive to the Egyptians. So, Moses was right and Pharaoh knew it, v. 26. So he repeated the demand that they take a three-day journey into the desert and there outside the border of Egypt they could safely offer sacrifices to *Yahweh*, v 27.

Pharaoh then said they could leave the land, but they must not go far away, v. 28. The actual statement in verse 28 is emphatic. Pharaoh literally said, "I myself will let you go." This was his way of indicating that he was in charge and the choice to let them go was his and it was not based on pressure from the plagues. In so doing Pharaoh revealed his true motive. He did not want to lose the conscripted work force to which the economy of Egypt had become accustomed. Having agreed to this demand, Pharaoh asked Moses to pray for him that the plague might be lifted. But, Moses also used the emphatic form of reply. He said, "I myself am going out from you and I myself will pray for you," v. 29. So Moses departed, prayed for *Yahweh* to remove the plague and it was done. Not one of the insects remained, v. 30-31. For the fourth time Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the Hebrews go.

The Fifth Plague, Diseased Livestock, 9:1-7

The account of this plague, like plagues two and six, is a short account. A pestilence will affect all forms of livestock. The death of animals again would impact all the communities to which the animals might be considered sacred. Not only would this be a religious impact but also it would be an economic impact on those who had domesticated animals that had commercial value.

Verses 1-3. Moses was sent to Pharaoh with the continuing demand, "Let My people go, that they may serve Me," v. 1. If the king refuses there will be a pestilence on all kinds of livestock. The word pestilence or murrain in some translations is דֵּבַר *deber*, which is a general term meaning a plague or sickness of some sort. Some have strongly suggested that it may have been anthrax, but there is no clear indication of the identity of the disease, only that it was of divine origin. Stuart however has an extensive article in his commentary that explains how the previous plagues could very well have laid the foundation for an outbreak of anthrax, see Stuart, *Exodus*, pp. 225-228. Whatever the pestilence was, it affected all the cattle of the field of which five are named including, horses, donkeys, camels, oxen, and sheep.

Verse 4-5. As with the fourth plague an exception was made for the Hebrew livestock. None of them would be affected by the pestilence. This exception, both here and in the plague of the insects was very instructive. God was targeting Pharaoh and the Egyptians with the plagues but sparing the Hebrews. Random occurrences of disease and natural disasters are not selective. So, the announcement of these exceptions before the fact was a way to validate the divine origin of both the plague upon the Egyptians and the protection of the Hebrews. In addition to the exception of Hebrew cattle, the specific time of the pestilence was declared. *Yahweh* appointed that the time would be the next day.

Verses 6-7. On the next day the plague came just as predicted. The pestilence fell on the livestock of the Egyptians, but not on any of the livestock of the Hebrews, v. 6. So Pharaoh sent messengers to Goshen and checked and not even one of the livestock of the Hebrews had been struck by the plague, v. 7. An apparent contradiction has been noted by liberal scholars who observed that if all the livestock of the Egyptians died, the warning given with the seventh plague to get livestock in from the fields given in Exodus 9:19, would not have been necessary. While the plague on the livestock was severe and extensive, there is no reason to interpret the statement "all of the livestock of Egypt died," as meaning every single animal died. The statement has two meanings. First, all of the livestock refers to every kind of the five mentioned. It means that all the livestock died of each kind that was affected by the pestilence. Second, it is part of the contrast that none of the Hebrew livestock were affected as opposed to all those of Egypt who were affected by the plague, had died. The Hebrew text clearly allows for this interpretation. Not every horse, donkey, camel, ox, or sheep died. But all those who were selectively affected did die. Whereas, not one of the Hebrews livestock was infected or died.

Lesson

Two Psalms immediately come to mind. Psalm 1:6 says that the "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish." Also, Psalm 91:7-8 "A thousand may fall at your side, And ten thousand at your right hand; *But* it shall not come near you. Only with your eyes shall you look, And see the reward of the wicked." The preservation and protection of God is a wonderful truth. We probably will not know until we get to heaven, just how many ways God has protected and provided for us. The divine protection of God on the livestock of the Hebrews was a powerful demonstration of God's determination to redeem His people and His ability to protect and provide for them, and us. This plague shows the helplessness of Serapis, the bull, who was linked closely with Osiris, see Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians, Vol. II*, pp. 198-199.

The Sixth Plague: Boils, 9:8-12

Like the third plague there is no appearance or announcement to Pharaoh before the arrival of this plague. Pharaoh twice promised to let the people go, and then relented on that promise, so this time there is to repeat of the demand to let the Hebrews depart. This is the shortest of all the plague narratives.

Verses 8-9. Moses and Aaron were instructed to take ashes from a kiln and go to Pharaoh where they would throw them in the air. The ashes would turn to dust and cover the land causing boils to break out on humans and animals. Some commentators and even medical experts have suggested a relationship between the fifth and sixth plagues. The description of this plague sounds like anthrax. As previously mentioned with the fifth plague, Stuart has a lengthy excursus entitled "Did Anthrax Cause the Fifth and Sixth Plagues?" see Stuart, *Exodus*, pp 225-228. Whatever the name, source, or cause of the disease, it was a judgment of God against Pharaoh and Egypt.

Verses 10-12. Moses and Aaron obediently follow the instructions given them. And immediately boils broke out on both man and beast. The magicians could not stand before the king and demonstrate their powers of protection because they too were afflicted with the boils, v. 11. Specific mention of the magicians accomplished two things. First, there was a close connection between magic and medicine in the Ancient Near East. The fact that the magicians were afflicted was testimony that they were unable to protect themselves from a judgment of God. Second, Pharaoh probably looked to them for medical needs for himself and his family. Since they could not heal themselves, it was apparent they would be useless in trying to heal others. Nevertheless, Pharaoh remains unyielding in his stance. The truth and the demands of *Yahweh* hardened his heart all the more and he did not respond to the ills of the sixth plague.

This concludes the second cycle of three plagues. It is easy to see the development of the hardening process in the attitude of Pharaoh through these first six plagues.

Lesson

Typhon was known as one of the gods who was a personification of evil, Budge, p.354. One of the things he did was to try to destroy the body of Osiris. He discovered the burial place of the body of Osiris and cut the corpse into fourteen parts and scattered it up and down the Nile River. Typhon remained as the personification of evil who had the power to save or to destroy flesh. It is to him that the magicians would appeal for the healing and restoration. But, since they could not secure healing for themselves, it was clear they could not deliver the Egyptians. This was another sign from God because only the Egyptians were affected by this plague on man and beast.