

## **Studies in Exodus No. 11**

**Exodus 7:14-10:29**

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**“The Plagues”**

**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We left the narrative, several Lord’s Day evenings back with Moses and Aaron having had their second interview with Pharaoh. They performed a miracle – turning Aaron’s staff into a snake – but the Egyptian magicians did the same. Pharaoh’s heart remained hard, as the Lord had said it would, and the interview came to nothing. The Lord had instructed Moses that he would harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he could multiply his miraculous signs and so that, when he delivered Israel from her bondage in Egypt, everyone – Egyptians and Israelites alike – would know that Yahweh is the living God. Things fall out according to God’s plan and will continue to do so.

Now begins the narratives of the ten plagues, or, better, of the nine plagues – alike in their demonstration of spectacular power and their ineffectuality to secure Israel’s release from bondage in Egypt – followed by the tenth and decisive plague. As this narrative of the nine plagues represents a single chapter in the story of the exodus – the same result repeated time and time again – I have decided to read it as a whole. Obviously, because it is a long narrative, we’ll have time to do little else but read and make a few comments as we go. This will help us to feel the effect of this history, however, feel it the way the generations who heard the Bible read rather than reading it themselves would have felt the effect.

### **Text Comment**

- 7:17 The two greatest “gods” of Egypt were the Nile and the Sun. The demonstrations of the Lord’s power over the Nile and the Sun are plagues 1 and 9, an inclusio, reminding us that the Lord is not simply defeating a great human king. He is exposing the falsehood of the entire system of nature worship upon which Egyptian and ancient Near Eastern society was based.
- v.19 The Nile was the life-blood of Egypt. The great river alone is what makes it possible for a society to thrive in what is otherwise the desert expanse of north-east Africa. The annual inundations of the Nile, with their deposits of rich soil carried downstream from the rich highlands of Ethiopia, are what make agriculture possible in an almost completely rainless country. Before the construction of dams on the river, especially the great Aswan dam in our own time, the river would flood the valley of Lower Egypt every year from July to October, raising the water level as much as 25 feet. It was these tons of mud deposited each year, by the way, that made building by brick possible in a land that otherwise provided only stone and sand. What is more, besides the water to irrigate the land and the soil itself, the river provided fish, the reeds and brush along its banks supplied game and fowl, so it was in every way the source of Egypt’s food. No wonder, in a way, that the Nile was deified by the Egyptians and that an Egyptian hymn should describe it as “the creator of every good thing.” [*Oxford Bible Atlas*, 21] But the Nile is no match for the living God, a point highlighted by the fact that the name “Nile” occurs 14 times between v. 14 and v. 25.

The Nile, as you know, flows from south to north, so Lower Egypt, where the capital was located, is the spreading delta, with its marshlands, man-made canals, rivers, and ponds. These various bodies of water in the Nile delta is what our v. 19 is referring to.

We should not think that the water of the river actually became blood. What is meant is that it turned red. In Joel 2:31 the prophet speaks of the sun turning to darkness and the moon to blood. It is a figurative way of speaking of something turning red. In itself there is nothing unusual in this, for, as we said, the Nile carries a great deal of red earth downstream from the highlands hundreds of miles to the south and also can be turned red by large quantities of minute fungi. This time the effect was heightened, not only by an unusual amount of rainfall to the south and so an unusually high volume of water carrying an unusually large amount of silt, but as well by various organisms and bacteria that poisoned the fish. This plague and the next two serve as a softening-up of Egypt for the hammer blows that are still to fall. These first three represent a major nuisance but little more. [Ellison, 45]

That is why the plague is allowed to run its course and why the Egyptian magicians make matters even worse by attempting to pollute the Nile themselves. These things had happened before. This was only an intensification of a natural phenomenon that was a commonplace of Egyptian life and so could be shrugged off as a coincidence. By digging near the bank of the river people could find clear water and survive.

Moses' striking of the water thus is not regarded as the act which makes the river red, but only a symbolic act that indicates that this is the Lord's doing and that the Lord is actually striking the Nile and Egypt's gods. So, in v. 25, we read of the Lord "striking the Nile."

Now we have been introduced to a theme that will recur in each of the first nine plagues, viz. that the plagues in turn bear a direct relation to the natural phenomena of the Nile valley. God used natural processes and familiar circumstances to work his wonders against Egypt and its so-called gods. The miraculous element is found, not in the trouble itself, but in the timing, the intensity, and the duration of the affliction, by which the Lord is seen to be in control and making use of these phenomena. Most all of biblical scholarship has accepted this connection between the plagues and the natural phenomena of the Nile river valley and it has become a commonplace in the interpretation of these chapters in Exodus since the publication of the painstaking work of the German scholar Greta Hort in the 1950s. [Cf. K. Kitchen, *NBD*, 1001ff.; Jack Collins, *The God of Miracles*, 130]

- 8:3 "The all-powerful Pharaoh should be invulnerable to such violation and should be able to protect his people. Instead, what this fearful catalogue of penetration conveys is the absolute, helpless exposure of all Egypt, from king to slave." [Alter, 350]
- 8:4 Once again the miraculous element is not found in the circumstance in and of itself. Frogs typically teemed in the Nile, especially after the inundation. Because frogs were a symbol of fertility in Egypt they were associated with a particular Egyptian goddess, Heqt, depicted as a woman with a frog's head, who was believed to help women in childbirth. But Yahweh can transform these symbols of fertility into a cause of Egypt's

blight. [Cassuto, 101] In this case, the frogs left the river – perhaps driven from the water by its pollution.

- 8:7 As the frogs were leaving the river in all likelihood because of the condition of the water, it would not have been difficult for the Egyptian magicians to take credit for what was happening. In any case, Pharaoh was not interested in a supplementary plague; he didn't want his magicians to make matters worse. He wanted them to end the plague, but this they could not do.
- 8:8 One commentator explains Pharaoh's reaction this way: "Pharaoh evidently cared little for the inconvenience caused to his people by the pollution of the Nile, but when the swarming frogs overcame all the efforts of his slaves to keep them out of the palace, the one who could summon all the luxuries of Egypt could not, like so many today born with a silver spoon in their mouths, endure the discomfort. He was willing to promise anything to get rid of the frogs and equally ready to forget the promise once they were gone." [Ellison, 47]
- 8:9 Moses' sarcastic condescension toward Pharaoh underscores the fact that Yahweh is in absolute control of everything that happens in Pharaoh's realm.
- 8:12 That is, Moses prayed that the plague would end precisely when Pharaoh asked that it end and so the Lord's control be proved once more.
- 8:13 The sudden death of the frogs has often been attributed to anthrax, perhaps an infection related to the putrefying fish along the river's banks and in her backwaters.
- 8:16 It seems we are to understand that Aaron struck the ground in the presence of Pharaoh immediately after he withdrew his permission for Israel to leave.
- 8:18 Once again, the miracle concerns the timing and the extent of a phenomenon with which Egyptians were familiar. A country like Egypt, with its hot, dry climate has always been troubled by small insects. This third miracle is linked to the first two in that both the teeming of insects and of frogs happened each year with the Nile's flooding. It is not certain what the insect was: perhaps gnats, perhaps mosquitoes, produced in excessive numbers by the exceptionally favorable breeding conditions created by the unusually high river. In this case, not only could the magicians not reverse Aaron's miracle, they couldn't imitate it either. C.F.W. Walther, the father and doughty champion of the Missouri Synod Lutheran church, tartly remarked, "The dabblers in natural science may acquire lice, but make them they cannot." [F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, i, 470 n.5]
- 8:19 This is not yet a confession of Yahweh's action; just some deity. They do not say "finger of Yahweh," but "finger of god." [Cassuto, 106] The NIV should not have capitalized "god." Still the magicians are admitting that Moses and Aaron are agents of a power higher than any that they command.
- 8:20 The next three plagues are also linked together in the series, as were the first three by their relatedness to the annual flooding of the Nile. In each case, none of the damage is suffered by the Israelites in Goshen. This distinction would further demonstrate not only

the supernatural character of the afflictions being visited upon Egypt but that not any God but Israel's God was in control.

- 8:24 It is assumed that this fly was of the biting variety and so work stopped in Egypt because people could not be out of doors.
- 8:26 "Moses knew that Pharaoh was cracking, and he was not going to be satisfied with anything less than full surrender." [Ellison, 50]
- 9:6 It has been suggested that the cattle were killed by an infection carried either by the frogs (perhaps anthrax) or by the flies. The "all the livestock" is a typical generalization. Egyptian livestock still living will be mentioned 9:19 and later the Egyptian chariots will follow Israel, obviously being pulled by horses. It is likely that the livestock out in the fields was affected but not those kept indoors, 9:3 specifically mentions livestock *in the field*.
- 9:9 We are not in any way minimizing the miraculous element when we point out that these boils too were commonplace in Egypt and might well have been caused by the bites of flies. The scattering of soot was a symbolic action to indicate that the plague of boils was no accident, not unlike the Lord putting mud on the blind man's eyes in John 9. In any case, for the first time, the Egyptians face a threat not only to their convenience or to their prosperity, but to their very lives.
- 9:11 There is a progression in regard to the magicians. First they seemed to be able to do what Moses and Aaron did, though not to the advantage of the Egyptians. Then they could not duplicate their feats and had to acknowledge the finger of God. Then they had to stand by silently in the face of power far greater than their own. Now, at last, they are themselves personal victims of the plagues and cannot even remain in the court to be witnesses to the conversations there. [Cassuto, 114]
- 9:19 The battle-lines are drawn. Pharaoh's priests have given up; he and he alone remains representing the religious system and faith of Egypt. The Lord as much as says, "I have been toying with you to this point, now you will see how powerless you really are before the power of the living God." This third and last cycle of three plagues is more severe and decisive than the previous two.
- 9:20 There were, by now, plenty of people in Egypt who had gathered that whatever Moses promised was bound to come to pass.
- 9:22 In every case attention is drawn to Moses and his action to ensure that everyone understands that the plague comes from the Lord whose agent Moses is.
- 9:26 Here too we have a miracle that, like the others, is an intensification of the natural. However, previous plagues intensified afflictions that were common in Egypt. Hail was a rarity. Egypt's Mediterranean coast receives now and received then some 8 inches of rain *per annum*. Cairo, further upstream, receives about an inch. At Aswan they receive virtually no rain at all. No wonder the Egyptians worshipped the sun! It was the constant of their lives, like the Nile. In sending hail, Yahweh is upping the ante!

- 9:28 This is considerably more than Pharaoh had said before.
- 9:30 If Pharaoh realized that the Israelites wanted more than simply to be gone for three days to offer sacrifice to their God, Moses realized that Pharaoh was not yet ready to surrender.
- 9:31 The flax was used to make linen, a principal fabric for clothing and an important Egyptian export; barley was used to make cheap bread to feed slaves. Flax and barley were harvested in February-March in Egypt.
- 9:35 We now are beginning to realize that the Lord not only hardened Pharaoh's heart but *had to* in order to keep Pharaoh from capitulating too soon, before the revelation of the Lord to Egypt and Israel was complete.
- 10:6 In the lands bordering on the desert of the Near East the threat of locusts still evokes terror and swarms can still wreck destruction despite man's best efforts to control them with modern technology. There is the record of a swarm in Palestine in 1865 in which the locusts entered the houses by way of the windows and the doors.
- 10:7 The cumulative weight of the damage had persuaded many Egyptian officials that the country could not sustain another blow to its central nervous system. Much of the crops had already been destroyed by the hail. Locusts would consume whatever was left.
- 10:10 By "bent on evil" Pharaoh means, "you want your freedom; you intend to leave and never return." He had seen through the request to take a three day journey into the desert to worship the Lord. In nature religions, apart from some fertility religions, women had little part to play, so it was natural, from their point of view, to offer this concession: the men could go but not the women. What follows indicates that Moses had refused to accept Pharaoh's terms.
- 10:11 Judging the Lord from the perspective of their own nature religion, the Egyptians probably believed that all this god would have wanted from his people was worship and sacrifice. He would have had no higher interests.
- 10:13 The Lord commands Moses to bring on the locust swarm and this is accomplished again by use of natural means: either a strong east wind brought the locusts into Egypt from the Sinai peninsula or "east wind" is a Hebrew technical term for the wind that brings locusts, an east wind to be sure in Palestine but a wind that would have come from the south in Egypt. In Canaan locusts and parching winds come from the deserts to the east. In Egypt such winds and blights would typically come from the Sudan, to the south." In any case, the locusts would have been building up in either the Arabian desert or the desert to the south of the delta, the desert being their normal breeding ground.
- 10:17 Pharaoh is reduced to pleading. Egypt's future is being threatened. "The reality caused the braggart on the throne of Egypt to collapse with a sob of 'only this once', and, like millions before and after him, with the relief came forgetfulness." [Ellison, 57]
- 10:21 As with the third plague of each of the first two cycles of three, this third plague of the third cycle also comes without warning. There are other interesting patterns in these

triads. In each the first plague is prefaced by Moses encountering Pharaoh going out early in the morning; in the second of each cycle Moses meets Pharaoh at his palace; and in the third in each triad the plague comes without warning. [Alter, 352]

- 10:23 The assumption is that the darkness was caused by the same wind that cleared Egypt of the locusts; but now it brought sand, a sandstorm that lasted three days. And perhaps with the sand the darker earth brought down by the extraordinarily high water of the previous summer which, now dried out, lay as fine dust on the ground. You may remember the sandstorm that stopped the advance of the American army for several days after they had entered Iraq. As the plagues had begun by Yahweh striking a blow at the prestige of the Nile, this last plague – before the Lord breaks the heart and the resistance of the Egyptians with the 10<sup>th</sup> plague – demonstrates that the other great god of Egypt, the sun, is powerless to stand before the presence of the Lord.
- 10:24 The demand that the livestock be left behind is probably an effort to save face, very important in oriental culture and, to be honest, very important to us as well. We are very willing to admit that we have been total nincompoops if only, somehow, we get something back with our confession – that others are also, that it wasn't completely our fault, that, if we were bad at something, we were very good at something else, whatever... Here Pharaoh would be able to say, "I let them go, but I kept their livestock."
- 10:26 Moses has no need to make concessions. He has been told to demand unconditional surrender and that is what he does. Throughout this period we see Moses as a confident servant of the Lord, the old hesitation left behind.
- 10:29 Moses realizes that the crisis has been reached. He knows that the preliminary rounds are now completed. He knows what is coming next. God's "toying" with Egypt in judgment is reaching its endgame. [Alter, 365]

What we have in all this narrative is an entirely unequal contest between Yahweh, the living God, and the gods and the men of Egypt who, after all, are the same. The gods are the men and they cannot stand up to God's power at all. This is by no means the only time in the Bible we are reminded – both to the encouragement of the saints and to the warning of the world – that no one can withstand the wrath of God. One must become God's friend by faith in his Son or he will suffer divine wrath and will not be able to withstand it.

Israel, throughout all her history, was reminded countless times of what God had done to the vaunted Egyptians and her great king. He had flicked them away with his finger. We Christians are to remember the same thing, and add to that memory that of Christ's triumph over the powers of nature in his miracles and then in his resurrection from the dead. In the recognition of his present sitting at the Right Hand, head over all things for the church, and in the prospect of his coming again we are not to worry, even if the contest seems to be drawn out and, for a time, inconclusive. The battle is the Lord's and he shall prevail. We are not to worry about our prospects. Do you worry about things? You needn't and you shouldn't. A narrative like this should lay the ax to the root of your worries. This God is our God even to the end of our lives! This same God who laid mighty Egypt in the dust. We are in good hands. Our enemies, at the last, stand powerless and hopeless before the living God.