

Plagues of Egypt: Some Thoughts

In Chapters 7 through 12 of the Book of Exodus the ten plagues with which God afflicted Egypt are described in some detail. I offer the following thoughts in the hope that they will help the participants of our Bible Study come to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the plagues.

Background. The Egyptian Pharaoh with whom Moses and Aaron tried to negotiate was most likely Ramses II, who at the time was certainly among the most powerful men in the ancient world. The Pharaoh had virtually complete power. In today's political terms, Egypt would be considered a totalitarian state under the despotic rule of the Pharaoh. He also ruled a civilization that had survived and prospered for well over a thousand years, an accomplishment the Egyptians attributed to the favor and power of their many gods.

Although, under Ramses II, Egypt was near the peak of its power and influence, it still faced threats, primarily from the growing power of an aggressive Hittite Empire in Asia Minor. Ramses, then, began building the cities of Pithom and Ramses-city in the Nile delta [Ex 1:11]. Filled with military warehouses, the cities would help supply Pharaoh's armies should they need to march north and engage the enemy in battle. After making peace with the Hittites (1280), Ramses embarked on extensive building projects. For all of this construction he needed slave labor, and the Hebrews were an excellent, readily available source. Ramses, therefore, had an economic and military incentive to ensure the Hebrews did not leave Egypt.

From the Egyptian perspective, the Hebrews were little more than rabble, a tribe of slaves worthy of attention only as a potential enemy. And the Egyptians certainly didn't consider the God of the Hebrews, this Yahweh, to be an especially powerful divinity since the people who worshipped Him were such lowly, insignificant creatures. After all, what had He actually done for them?

From a human perspective, then, the two peoples, the Egyptians and the Hebrews, could not have been more unequal. The reality, however, does not involve an unequal human encounter between two peoples. What we actually witness as the plagues progress is an encounter between a king of this world, along with his non-existent pagan gods, and the one, true God, Creator of heaven and earth. Could anything be more unequal?

The Call of Moses. Moses, saved from death, and adopted and educated by Egyptian royalty, must flee the country when he kills an Egyptian overseer who has killed a Hebrew worker. In all likelihood the Pharaoh who ruled at this time was Seti I (1317-1301). Most scholars believe his successor, Ramses II (1301-1234), was the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

After escaping from Egypt, Moses lived among the Midianites, married Zipporah, the daughter of the Midianite priest, Reuel (also called Jethro), and raised a family. But one day, on Sinai, Moses has an encounter with God who appeared to him in the form of fire. God spoke to Moses, explaining His purpose:

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt

and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey' [Ex 3:6-8].

When Moses asked God to reveal His name, he is told:

"I am who I am...This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you" [Ex 3:14].

God then called Moses to be His messenger and herald, to be the one who would lead God's people to the freedom He desired for them.

Because the Pharaoh had died [Ex 2:23; 4:19] and been replaced by his successor, those who had sought Moses were no longer alive, thus allowing Moses to return.

From all that follows in the relationship between God and Moses we come to understand that whenever God calls upon a person to do His work in the world, He always equips him for that vocation.

Moses and the Lord. The events leading up to the Exodus began with a conversation between God and Moses [Ex 7:1-9]. As it progressed, God revealed all that would happen during the future encounters between Moses, his brother, Aaron, and the Pharaoh.

"You shall speak all that I command you..."

"Pharaoh will not listen to you..."

God will ensure success through "great acts of judgment."

"The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord..."

When Pharaoh demanded a sign, Aaron's rod became the first means through which God displayed His power. The rod, of course, did not possess any magical or miraculous power, but was a sign of God's power at work in the world. Unlike the Pharaoh's sorcerers with their blind magical arts, Moses and Aaron were messengers and heralds of God Himself, and merely pointed to God's power at work. Aaron's rod became a serpent (the Hebrew word used signifies a creature far more terrifying than a common snake) and swallowed the staffs of the Egyptian magicians. This swallowing is another sign pointing to future events, since the only other use of the verb "to swallow" in Exodus refers to the swallowing of the Egyptians in the sea [Ex 15:12].

But as God predicted, Pharaoh's hardened heart was unmoved and he refused to let God's people leave Egypt and go to the land the Lord "swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

Aaron's rod was also seen by some of the Early Church Fathers as a figure or type of the Cross because it is a sign of the power of God. In making this claim they refer to St. Paul's comment that:

"For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but

to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" [1 Cor 1:22-24].

The Plagues. After this initial manifestation of His power and Pharaoh's resistance, God inflicted Egypt with a series of plagues, actions taken to bring both Pharaoh and the Hebrew people to an acceptance of the great event to come: the Exodus of the people from Egypt. As we read the descriptions of each plague, note several interesting aspects:

- † The Pharaoh's magicians attempted to apply their skills only in the first three plagues. Once their arts are defeated during the third plague, they declare, "This is the finger of God," and never again try to upstage God. (This reference to the "finger of God" is a figure of speech called a synecdoche, in which a part refers to the whole. God's "finger" represents God Himself and His omnipotence. It appears again, in Exodus 31:18, when the Ten Commandments are written on the stone tablets by the "finger of God.") Interestingly, Jewish tradition apparently preserved the names of two of Pharaoh's magicians – Jannes and Jambres – because we find them mentioned by St. Paul when he uses them as examples of "people of depraved mind, unqualified in the faith" [2 Tim 3:8].
- † Each plague, as it afflicted the country and its people, became increasingly calamitous. The first four plagues – bloody Nile water, frogs, gnats, and flies – were more irritating than damaging. But plagues five through eight – livestock epidemic, boils, hail, and locusts – seriously affected the people themselves, their property, and their livelihood. The ninth plague – the plague of total darkness – brought the nation to a virtual standstill. But it was the tenth plague – the death of all first-born of both man and beast – that had such an impact on the entire nation that Pharaoh finally relented and let the People of God go.
- † Note, too, that God used Moses and Aaron as His messengers and also had them act for Him in the early plagues. Their role as messengers continued but increasingly God acted on His own making it evident that He was manifesting His power through these plagues. This was especially true of the final, tenth plague, the national catastrophe that brought the deaths of all first-born.
- † I also find it interesting that many of the plagues involved periodic events that happened naturally in Egypt; e.g., the red Nile, locusts, storms, disease, etc. The plagues, then, are both typically Egyptian but also divine since God initiates each at will. By including these natural events among the ten plagues God reminds us that He acts constantly in our world, that He is the Creator of all things, that He is the Lord of History who intervenes in our lives in ways that further the fulfillment of His plan. We also come to see that elements of creation can bring about disaster when a culture of death rules.
- † This, indeed, is the key to the entire episode: that God, the Lord of History, created and commands all of nature and entered into the lives of these people – the Egyptians and the Hebrews – to free the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and to lead them to the freedom of the Promised Land. Keep in mind, too, this was all in preparation for humanity's ultimate freedom through the redemptive Passion,

Death, and Resurrection of the Son of God, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Indeed, as the Church Fathers remind us: all of Scripture points to Jesus Christ.

- † Pharaoh was obstinate, and continued to resist God throughout the ten plagues. His obstinacy is mentioned again and again as the plagues progress. From this we realize that human obstacles designed to thwart God's plan are nothing when confronted by His power. Time after time we hear the words: "By this you shall know that I am the Lord..." St. Paul, commenting on Pharaoh's obstinacy, tells us that it brings God's power and wisdom to light, helping us recognize His omnipotence:

For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "This is why I have raised you up, to show my power through you that my name may be proclaimed throughout the earth." Consequently, he has mercy upon whom he wills, and he hardens whom he wills [Rom 9:17-18]..

First Plague: The Nile Turns Blood Red. The Nile would on occasion turn red naturally because red mud sometimes entered the Upper Nile from Abyssinia and flowed down into Egypt. But whether the Nile become actual blood or simply turned blood red is not really important. The key point is that God commanded it and it happened. We are told the magicians could duplicate the event; yet the river was already blood red so no one is particularly impressed.

The event is really all about the confrontation between Pharaoh and God, one that significantly takes place on the Nile. Egypt had divinized the river because it was so essential to the nation's survival. But Pharaoh, through his plan of Hebrew infanticide, turned it from a source of life into a river of death. In the Book of Wisdom we are reminded of Egypt's use of the river to slaughter Israel's children:

"Instead of a river's perennial source, troubled with impure blood as a rebuke to the decree for the slaying of infants" [Wis 11:6-7].

As the Lord instructs Moses, "There will be blood throughout the land of Egypt" [Ex 7:19], an ominous sign pointing to future events in which death came to Egypt: (1) the tenth plague that brought death to all of Egypt's firstborn, and (2) the Egyptians died in the sea when pursuing God's people.

Second Plague: Frogs. I had always thought this plague rather odd, until late at night, during the recent hurricane, I looked out on our lanai and saw four small frogs attached to the glass of our French doors. I suddenly realized what it would be like if those four were instead a thousand. Yes, in large numbers an inundation of frogs would be extremely irritating. There's also a touch of humor here when Pharaoh's magicians duplicate the plague and consequently add to Egypt's woes by making a bad situation worse.

The key here is that God, through Moses, initiated the plague and stopped it at will. Moses intends to demonstrate to Pharaoh that "there is no one like the Lord our God" [Ex 8:10]. We also see Moses acting as intercessor when Pharaoh begs him to "entreat the Lord to take away the frogs from me and from my people" [Ex 8:8]. Subsequently "the Lord did according to the word of Moses" [Ex 8:13], and heaps of dead frogs cover the land. With this Pharaoh begins to relent and promises to release God's people for sacrifice; but later his hardened heart leads him to change his mind. Once again

Pharaoh is presented with a sign of things to come: if he continues in his obstinacy by opposing the God of Life, Egypt will reap only death.

Third Plague: Gnats. Even a few gnats can be bothersome, but try to imagine a few billion of them. Three times we are told the plague arose from the “dust of the earth,” another image of death, one that pointed to the fate of Egypt if Pharaoh continued to oppose the Lord God. As God told Adam and Eve after the Fall: “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” [Gn 3:19].

The plague of gnats was so bad, affecting both the people and their livestock, the Pharaoh’s magicians were unable to either duplicate or stop the plague using their arts. Consequently they were convinced that only God could cause such a plague. “This is the finger of God” [Ex 8:15], they told Pharaoh; but, as God had predicted, Pharaoh refused to listen and remained obstinate. After this, however, the magicians seem no longer willing or able to apply their magic.

Fourth Plague: Flies. Are huge swarms of flies worse than swarms of gnats? Well, they’re certainly bigger, and some bite, and they even entered the Egyptian homes in large numbers. I suppose the answer is “Yes.” Once again, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh took place on the banks of the Nile. Moses made a point of telling Pharaoh that the plague would not affect God’s people in Goshen. They will be protected and God will create “a division between my people and your people” [Ex 8:23]. Note that with these words Moses implies an equality between him and Pharaoh, but that God is far greater than both men.

Again Pharaoh seemed to relent, first telling Moses that the Israelites can sacrifice to God, but only within Egypt. Moses knew this is not what God desired, so he told Pharaoh that the Egyptian people would object to the sacrifice of lambs and demanded the freedom to sacrifice in the wilderness. Pharaoh also demonstrated his concern that he might lose his source of cheap – i.e., slave – labor if he allowed the Hebrews to travel too far from Egypt. But with a few stipulations, Pharaoh and Moses agreed to a compromise. Not surprisingly, though, once God removed the plague of flies, Pharaoh again hardened his heart and broke his promise.

Fifth Plague: Livestock Epidemic. This plague was far more serious than any that preceded it. Because it killed livestock, everything from cattle to camels, it affected the livelihood of the Egyptian people, thus greatly increasing the societal pressure on Pharaoh. And again God shows His favor for the people of Israel by protecting their livestock from the plague. As the plagues progress we see God stressing the fact that His People are unlike all others, that He has chosen them for something very special. But for Pharaoh to accept this he must deny centuries of Egyptian tradition, in effect all that he and his people have believed about their civilization.

Sixth Plague: Boils. With this plague, the afflictions became more personal, since the boils cover the bodies of all Egyptians, and even plagued their animals. Once again we encounter the Pharaoh’s magicians, but this time they do not even try to stop the plague, for they too suffered and “could not stand before Moses because of the boils” [Ex 9:11]. We never hear from them again, and Pharaoh remains obstinate.

Seventh Plague: Hail. God instructed Moses to remind Pharaoh that it is only because of God's mercy that Pharaoh and his people were still alive. He also accused Pharaoh of exalting himself "against my people," of placing himself above God. Here, too, we find Moses reminding Pharaoh that the Lord is not some local or tribal god, but rather the God of all: "...I let you live, to show you my power, so that my name may be declared through all the earth" [Ex 9:16].

And so God sends a storm like no other upon the land of Egypt – "as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now" [Ex 9:18]. The hail, accompanied by lighting and thunder (also a foreshadowing of God's manifestation on Sinai), rained down on Egypt, destroying livestock and crops. Only Goshen, where God's people lived, was spared. The storm also resulted in the first deaths among the Egyptians, a sign of what will come if Pharaoh continued to oppose God.

We also come to understand that God's purpose was the deliverance of His people, not the destruction of Egypt. Pharaoh, through his actions, then became an instrument of God's plan for Israel.

We also see signs that the Egyptian people came to recognize God's power, leading Pharaoh again to relent: "I have sinned...the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong" [Ex 9:27]. But, once the storm had ceased, Pharaoh again became obstinate and refused to let God's people go.

Eighth Plague: Locusts. Moses introduced this plague by reminding Pharaoh that God is great, and Pharaoh should approach Him in all humility "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?" [Ex 10:3] Pharaoh's servants saw only the ruin of Egypt if the plagues were to continue. They pleaded with Pharaoh to "let the men go, that they may serve the Lord" [Ex 10:7]. Pharaoh tried to introduce another compromise of sorts by letting the men go to sacrifice in the wilderness, but keeping the women and children as hostages to ensure the men's return. Of course, God cannot accept this since His plan involves the total freedom of His people.

The locusts ravaged the entire country, so that "not a green thing remained" [Ex 10:15]. This leads Pharaoh again to confess his sinfulness with these remarkable words:

"I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, I pray you, only this once, and entreat the Lord your God only to remove this death from me" [Ex 10:16-17].

Pharaoh, then, assumes an attitude of the penitent but it doesn't last. As before he reneges and refuses to free God's people.

Ninth Plague: Darkness. We don't know the nature of the three days of darkness that plagued Egypt. Did God simply inflict the country with a massive sandstorm that blocked all sunlight, or was the darkness a supernatural manifestation? It matters little, since whatever the cause it resulted in a kind of national paralysis that stopped all productive activity. It also caused Pharaoh to give permission for God's people to leave and serve the Lord, but not with their flocks and herds. This God could not accept. Pharaoh's stubbornness brought a permanent end to the negotiations, and the only acceptable outcome is the total freedom of God's people. Indeed, Pharaoh was so distraught by all that had happened to him and his country, in his anger he threatened Moses with death.

Tenth Plague: Death of the First-Born. God tells Moses that a final plague will be necessary to convince Pharaoh to free God's people. (Interestingly, this is the first time the word "plague" is actually used.) We're also told that, by this time, "Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people" [Ex 11:3]. Pharaoh, therefore, appears to be alone in his obstinacy, driven less by a concern for his nation and people and more by personal pride.

Moses describes this final plague by stating that "all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits upon his throne, even to the first-born of the maidservant who is behind the mill; and to all the first-born of cattle" [Ex 11:5]. But the Israelites will be spared, so that all will recognize the distinction God makes between Israel and Egypt.

Most of Exodus 12 describes the institution of the Passover, the feast of the unleavened bread, and specific Passover instructions to protect God's people from the final plague. It concludes with a brief narrative describing the plague and the deaths of all the first-born of Egypt, including Pharaoh's own son. It happened abruptly in the darkness of the night, and "there was not a house where one was not dead" [Ex 12:30].

Pharaoh, as God had foreseen, immediately called for Moses and Aaron and tells them:

"Rise up, go forth from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also!" [Ex 12:31-32]

As they prepared to leave, the Israelites requested gold, silver and clothing from the Egyptians. Recognizing how God has blessed the Israelites, the Egyptians actually gave them these presents, once again fulfilling God's promises to His people [Ex 3:22]. And so the Israelites, much like a victorious army, left Egypt plundered of its riches.

Moses and the Israelites departed quickly, having experienced exactly what God had promised from the beginning. When God first called Moses to lead His people to the freedom and the land He planned for them, he told Moses:

"Yet I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to go unless his hand is forced. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wondrous deeds I will do in its midst. After that he will let you go. I will even make the Egyptians so well-disposed toward this people that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed" [Ex 3:19-21].