

4. The Plagues (3Q 2025 Exodus)

Biblical material: Exod. 7:8–10:29; Num. 33:4; Rom. 1:24–32; Ps. 104:27, 28; Isa. 28:2, 12–17; Isa. 44:9, 10, 12–17; Exodus 9:35.

Quotes

- Why were the waters first smitten and with blood? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, and God said, ‘I will smite their god first and then his people. *Jewish Midrash*
- The plague narrative is both an integral part of the Exodus story and one of the most difficult parts of this story to understand. Contemporary readings of the Exodus therefore struggle to reinterpret the plagues to reflect our current consciousness and/or to expand the list of plagues in order to draw attention to all of the parts of the world that remain in need of liberation. *Rabbi Jill Jacobs*
- The purpose of the Ten Plagues was not to destroy Egypt, but to offer the primary lesson to that idolatrous culture: “The God of creation and of Abraham is the only God...and Egyptian deities are imaginations.” God desires the good for all mankind. *Moshe Ben-Chaim*
- The Ten Plagues. But if it was needful to make the Israelites willing to depart it was also needful to make the Egyptian king and his people willing to let them depart; and this was accomplished by the plagues which fell upon Egypt, showing Israel as under God's peculiar care and the gods of Egypt powerless to protect their people. *Jesse Lyman Hurlbut*

Questions

What is significant about the plagues God sent on Egypt? How do we reconcile the God revealed by Jesus with the god of the Ten Plagues? Why did Pharaoh remain stubborn and obstinate for so long? Why didn't he listen to his officials who told him Egypt was being destroyed? (Exodus 10:7). What about Pharaoh's warning to Moses and Moses' response? (Exodus 10:28, 29).

Bible summary

Exodus 7:8–10:29 records the ten plagues, including when Pharaoh almost seems to give in (10:7-9). The Israelites set out as the Egyptians are burying their firstborn sons (see Numbers 33:4). Romans 1:24–32 describes those who refuse to know God and worship idols in the form of animals.. God is the one who feeds the animals (see Psalm 104:27, 28). God calls on his people to listen to him, or face the consequences (see Isaiah 28:2, 12–17). “Because of his stubborn attitude, Pharaoh would not let the Israelites leave, just as the Lord had predicted through Moses.” Exodus 9:35.

Comment

The story of the plagues of Egypt leads to some serious questions over God and his actions. Most of all was God employing force to achieve what he wanted? Were the plagues an example of God's vindictiveness to coerce Pharaoh to acquiesce with his demand “Let my people go”?

Or is this once again a demonstration of the great controversy in an extreme form as God confront the Devil? Don't we see here the intransigence of evil, the persistence of rebellion? What more could God have done?

There is plenty of evidence that can be used to deny God's benevolence: the Flood, the killing of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, and now the death of the firstborn in Egypt. But this must all be seen against the backdrop of the conflict. At times God has to use his power. Yet in the end when he comes in person, what do we see? A warlike antagonistic God, or the love of one who seeks and to save that which was lost?

So let's look again at what is going on here with Moses and Pharaoh. In the beginning when God gives Moses the assignment of leading his people out of Egypt and Moses poses those problems,

asks the questions, God does not dismiss them but answers them specifically and helpfully, so that Moses can continue to have complete confidence in his divine Friend.

Certainly the charge of the Devil that God is arbitrary and tyrannical is not proved true here. Rather we see God *wanting* to work through a human agent, despite the risks. He wishes to get his message across by the free accepting choice of his created beings. Moses could still have said “No,” despite all God’s assurances. God would not have blasted Moses off the face of the earth for refusing. Amazingly enough, the task was to convince another human being to follow God’s plan.

Didn’t God have the power to lead his people out of Egypt whatever the situation? Of course. Was the God of the Universe dependent upon the permission of a mere man, whatever his position? Undoubtedly. Then why *ask* Moses to go and *ask* Pharaoh to let *God’s* people go?

Because that’s exactly the way God is. He has no wish to compel or force. He may bring pressure to bear, he may exert influence, but choice remains. Moses chose right, and enjoyed the benefits. Pharaoh chose wrong, and reaped the consequences. God is not some hard-hearted dictatorial God who rewards servitude and punishes rebellion--but a God who will allow each the free exercise of choice, despite the pain those choices may cause him.

Pharaoh *chose* to “harden his heart” against the plagues. He *chose* to experience the tragic loss of his firstborn son--and all of Egypt with him. And finally he *chose* to pursue the fleeing Israelites into the Red Sea, despite the undeniable proof of God’s miracles on their behalf. In the end God let him go his own way, and follow his mad course into the watery valley of death and destruction.

Many Egyptians had seen in the events leading up to the Exodus that this God had much more to offer than the animalistic idols and images they worshipped. That’s why so many had joined the Israelites when they did eventually leave. What of those back in Egypt who still wondered?

They’d seen all their ‘gods’ of the flies and frogs and bulls proved completely powerless when confronted with the true God. They’d seen his amazing power and might. They’d seen the way he’d led his people out of slavery. They’d heard of the total destruction of the pursuing Egyptian army. They had much to learn about this God they had chosen to follow. The disasters that had fallen on Egypt had convinced them about God’s power, but what of his character and nature?

Ellen White Comments

Because of the stubbornness of Pharaoh, it was decided that the voice of God, in words of command, must demand that the Israelites be set free from their life of slavery. Pharaoh refused, and the Lord punished the kingdom because the earthly ruler would not let God’s people go to become a kingdom under divine rulership. Pharaoh’s refusal brought many plagues upon Egypt, until the stubborn king was impelled to concede to God’s plan. And then he again hardened his heart in rebellion against God and sent his immense army to bring the Israelites back to continual service for the Egyptian ruler. {CTr 106.3}

I was directed to the power of God manifested through Moses, when the Lord sent him in before Pharaoh. Satan understood his business, and was upon the ground. He well knew that Moses was chosen of God to break the yoke of bondage upon the children of Israel; and that he in his work prefigured Christ’s first advent to break Satan’s power over the human family, and deliver those who were made captives by his power. Satan knew that when Christ should appear, mighty works and miracles would be wrought by him, that the world might know that the Father had sent him... Pharaoh called for the magicians to work with their enchantments. They also showed signs and wonders, for Satan came to their aid, to work through them. Yet even here, the work of God was shown superior to the power of Satan, for the magicians could not perform all those miracles God wrought through Moses. Only a few of them could they do. The magicians’ rods did become serpents, but Aaron’s rod swallowed up theirs. After the magicians sought to produce the lice, and could not, then they were compelled by the power of God to acknowledge even to Pharaoh, saying, “This is the finger of God.” Satan wrought through the magicians in a manner calculated to harden the heart of the tyrant Pharaoh against the miraculous manifestations of God’s power. {4bSG 81-3}