

Exodus, Part 6

In our study, we have seen four plagues brought upon the Egyptians because Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites to leave Egypt. He gets close, but at the last minute, he changes his mind and refuses to let them go. His heart is hardened, and the more pressure God puts on him the more obstinate he becomes. We are dealing with an extremely proud person.

We should understand that this is more than just pride. There is a financial issue here. If the Israelites leave, Pharaoh loses a major portion of his workforce in the Nile delta where he has major construction projects in the midst of being built. He surely suspects that once they are out of Egypt on this so-called “three-day journey to worship their God” he will never see them again. That possibility has great financial implications for his kingdom projects. Egyptian history tells us that in the fall of the year that the Israelites left, Pharaoh launched expeditions into the land of Canaan and brought back over 100,000 “slaves”. Those were to help replace the Israelites lost in the Exodus the previous spring.

With Pharaoh’s continued resistance God will bring on the next plague.

The Fifth Plague: Egyptian Livestock Die

Exodus 9:1 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go into Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. ² For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, ³ behold, the hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks. ⁴ But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die.” ’ ”

The fifth plague again began with the freedom demand and a threat. If Pharaoh refused to listen, a terrible disease would afflict the cattle of Egypt the next day. Again the area of Goshen would be exempt. Pharaoh did not heed the warning and so it was: by the thousands Egyptian livestock died.

With dead frogs throughout the land and swarms of flies spreading germs, this pestilence, so destructive to animal life, may have been the infectious disease known as anthrax. This would have been in January when cattle were led out to pasture after the Nile inundation subsided.

This plague would have been economically distressing for the Egyptians. Also, many animals were sacred, particularly the bull which represented the god Apis or Re, and the cow which represented Hathor, the goddess of love, beauty, and joy. Hathor was depicted in the form of a woman with the head (or sometimes only the horns) of a cow. Also, Khnum was a ram god.

Exodus 9:5 And the Lord set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.” ⁶ And the next day the Lord did this thing. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died. ⁷ And Pharaoh sent, and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

The animals of the Israelites, the object of God’s mercies, would not be affected by the plague. Pharaoh sent servants to investigate conditions in Goshen and found them just as Moses had predicted. Even though he saw that God had indeed made a distinction, he still refused to repent and still would not release the Israelites.

But if all the cattle died in this plague, how can one explain the presence of animals later in verse 10 and of livestock in verses 20–21? Two explanations are possible:

1. The word “all” (v. 6) may be used as a figure of speech for a large quantity without meaning the totality of the livestock.
2. Perhaps a better solution is that the plague killed only the animals in the field as suggested in verse 3 but not those in shelters. “...the hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are **in the field**... (v. 3).

No mention is made of Aaron in this plague.

The Sixth Plague: Boils

Exodus 9:8 And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh. ⁹ It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt.” ¹⁰ So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh. And Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. ¹¹ And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians. ¹² But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

Like the third and ninth plagues, this one was not announced to Pharaoh. This plague, the first to endanger human life, resulted in open sores on the bodies of men and animals.

Moses’ tossing soot from a furnace may have been a symbolic act, like his and Aaron’s use of their staffs in several plagues. That Moses said nothing threatening while performing this action. It must have been rather disturbing to Pharaoh and his court for Moses to enter the presence of Pharaoh and remain silent while tossing ashes into the air, and suddenly the land is stricken with boils.

The Egyptians, fearfully aware of epidemics, worshiped Sekhmet, a lion-headed goddess with alleged power over disease; Sunu, the pestilence god; and Isis, goddess of healing. Yet these deities could not deliver the people and animals from their torments.

With their deities powerless and their bodies so disfigured, the magicians could no longer appear before Moses. The people suffered more under this plague than any of those that preceded it.

At this point and for the first time, the text states that *God* hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and Pharaoh persisted in willful obstinance.

Of course, God knew in advance how Pharaoh would react but gave him ten chances to have a change of heart. God, in His mercy, slowly increased

the pressure with each plague being worse than the previous plagues. Each time Pharaoh was given a chance to repent and let the Israelites go, but his refusal meant that God would be compelled to increase the severity of the next plague.

The Seventh Plague: Hail

Exodus 9:13 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. ¹⁴ For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. ¹⁶ But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. ¹⁸ Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. ¹⁹ Now therefore send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die when the hail falls on them.” ’ ”

This judgment begins the third cycle of the plagues. These three plagues (seven, eight, and nine) were more severe than the previous ones and are described in more detail.

This seventh plague resulted in great economic duress. The abilities of several Egyptian gods were again being challenged. Nut, the sky goddess, was not able to forestall the storm; and Osiris, the god of crop fertility, could not maintain the crops in this hailstorm; nor could Set, the storm god, hold back this storm.

Moses was to see Pharaoh early in the morning. The reason for the impending judgment was again Pharaoh’s unwillingness to release God’s people.

Pharaoh had failed to recognize the worth of the God of the Hebrews (cf. 3:18; 5:3; 7:16; 9:1; 10:3). He would not admit that there is no one like Him in all the earth.

Meanwhile, God had been gracious in not displaying the full fury of His wrath.

Exodus 9:15 For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth.

Thus far Yahweh had restrained himself. In his prior refusals to release the Israelites, Pharaoh was creating the occasion through which God could show his power. With this plague, the name of the Lord would be proclaimed throughout all the earth because of what happened in Egypt. God would teach them something of His power, and this was why He had raised up Pharaoh.

Exodus 9:16 But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.

The next blow against the land would be a hailstorm. God was about to demonstrate His power with a hailstorm of huge proportions, one without historical precedent. Yet in His grace, God told the king to have livestock and people brought under shelter. In Egypt, cattle were usually outdoors from January to April, before the summer heat set in.

Exodus 9:20 Then whoever feared the word of the Lord among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses, ²¹ but whoever did not pay attention to the word of the Lord left his slaves and his livestock in the field.

Hearing of Moses' forewarning, some of the Egyptians believed God's word through Moses and responded appropriately.

Exodus 9:22 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, on man and beast and every plant of the field, in the land of Egypt." ²³ Then

Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the Lord rained hail upon the land of Egypt. ²⁴ There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. ²⁵ The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And the hail struck down every plant of the field and broke every tree of the field. ²⁶ Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were, was there no hail.

Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the Lord sent thunder, hail, rain, and fire to fall on man and beast and every plant of the field in the land of Egypt.

The Hebrew word behind “fire” used here is *esh*. Technically “fire” is the correct translation. It is used many times in the Torah for a cooking fire (Ex 12.8), the fire on the altar burning up sacrifices (Lev 1.7), a campfire for warmth (Ex 35.3), and similar literal normal fires. However, in this case, it is not the best translation.

Ancient Hebrew was not a scientific language or culture, so they don't have a technical word for electrical discharge within the atmosphere. Lightning is described the best they could using a variety of words. It is called a “flashing sword” (Ex 19.16), a “burning lamp” (Ex 20.18), the “light of day” (Job 37.11), and “red hot embers of charcoal” (Ps 78.38). What is being referred to here with this word for “fire” is almost certainly lightning, and, in this case, especially severe lightning to appear as if fire is raining down on the earth.

Men and animals were killed by the hail, and crops were demolished. However, the phrase “every plant in the fields” (vv. 22, 25) is qualified by the statements in verses 31–32. “Everything” refers to those crops about to be harvested, namely, flax (used in making linen cloth), and barley. Wheat and emmer (an inferior type of wheat called “spelt” in some translations) were unaffected. Flax and barley blossomed in January and were harvested in March–April. Wheat and emmer ripened about a month later (in April) and were harvested in June–July. So this plague may have occurred in February.

The Lord brought destruction on the Egyptians as He had predicted, though the hail did not fall on the Israelites in the land of Goshen (v. 26).

Exodus 9:27 Then Pharaoh sent and called Moses and Aaron and said to them, “This time I have sinned; the Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. ²⁸ Plead with the Lord, for there has been enough of God’s thunder and hail. I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.” ²⁹ Moses said to him, “As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord. The thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord’s. ³⁰ But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear the Lord God.” ³¹ (The flax and the barley were struck down, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. ³² But the wheat and the emmer were not struck down, for they are late in coming up.) ³³ So Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh and stretched out his hands to the Lord, and the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured upon the earth. ³⁴ But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants. ³⁵ So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

Such an awe-inspiring display of omnipotence brought an unqualified repentance from Pharaoh when he said, “I have sinned.” Acknowledging that God was right, he consented to release the Israelites.

Moses promised to ask God to stop the plague, though he recognized that Pharaoh’s repentance was superficial and merely self-seeking (v. 30).

Since the plague was raining murderous hail through Egypt, except in Goshen, how could Moses move about so freely? The plague was probably in the fields and selective in what it destroyed.

Moses was correct in his understanding that Pharaoh’s repentance was only superficial. His heart remained hardened against God, and as soon as the plague was lifted, he refused to let the people go.

The Eighth Plague: Locusts

Exodus 10:1 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, ² and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord.”

³ So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh and said to him, “Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, that they may serve me. ⁴ For if you refuse to let my people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country, ⁵ and they shall cover the face of the land so that no one can see the land. And they shall eat what is left to you after the hail, and they shall eat every tree of yours that grows in the field, ⁶ and they shall fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and of all the Egyptians, as neither your fathers nor your grandfathers have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day.’ ” Then he turned and went out from Pharaoh.

This plague reveals another purpose for the judgments. Besides humbling Pharaoh and bringing about Israel’s deliverance, the plagues showed *Israel* God’s power, which they were to tell to their children and grandchildren.

Exodus 10:2 ...that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians ...

By these signs, Israel would know that God is the Lord (Yahweh).

Pharaoh had so hardened his heart that God determined to abandon him to the consequences of his hardness. Again the alternative to obedience was made clear to Pharaoh. If he refused to humble himself before God, then God would bring a terrible locust infestation.

Locusts, flying by the millions, can completely devastate miles of crop, eating leaves and even tree bark. Much of a nation’s food supply from crops can be wiped out completely in a matter of hours.

What the previous plague of hail did not destroy would now be devoured. Like the frogs and flies, the locusts would enter people's houses. Like the hail, the locust invasion was unprecedented in Egypt. Egypt had experienced devastation by locusts before, but this plague would be far worse.

With this Moses turned and left the presence of Pharaoh.

Exodus 10:7 Then Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the Lord their God. Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?" ⁸ So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh. And he said to them, "Go, serve the Lord your God. But which ones are to go?" ⁹ Moses said, "We will go with our young and our old. We will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, for we must hold a feast to the Lord." ¹⁰ But he said to them, "The Lord be with you, if ever I let you and your little ones go! Look, you have some evil purpose in mind. ¹¹ No! Go, the men among you, and serve the Lord, for that is what you are asking." And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.

With Moses absent, the officials finally cracked. Egypt had already been ruined by the first seven plagues. Such extensive economic disaster caused Pharaoh's officials to realize that retaining their slaves was not worth the price: Egypt, they said, was ruined. They urged Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to depart to worship their God.

So Pharaoh succumbed to Moses' general petition and said, "Go, serve the Lord your God. But which ones are to go?" Though Moses never said he and the people would return, Pharaoh sensed, that if they took all their family members, flocks, and herds, they would be gone permanently. This, he called evil.

So he introduced another compromise: Have only the men go. Moses and Aaron, unwilling to settle for this compromise, were expelled from the court.

Exodus 10:12 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, so that they may come upon the land of Egypt and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left." ¹³ So

Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind had brought the locusts. ¹⁴ The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. ¹⁵ They covered the face of the whole land so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

As a result of Pharaoh's impiety and stubbornness, God told Moses to stretch out his hand so that locusts would come. He extended his staff and an east wind blew all day. Some say "east wind" means "fierce wind" because normally winds blow across Egypt from the south. However, this interpretation is strained because later in verse 19 Moses referred to a west wind that carried the locusts into the Red Sea (lit., "Sea of [Papyrus] Reeds").

The devastation was beyond imagination; their numbers were so massive that "the land was darkened". All the land of Egypt was affected. Egypt was deprived of her natural beauty with tragic economic, social, and theological consequences.

Nut, the Egyptian sky goddess, could not control these locusts, and Osiris, the god of crop fertility, could not prevent the destruction of the crops.

Exodus 10:16 Then Pharaoh hastily called Moses and Aaron and said, "I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. ¹⁷ Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with the Lord your God only to remove this death from me." ¹⁸ So he went out from Pharaoh and pleaded with the Lord. ¹⁹ And the Lord turned the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea. Not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt. ²⁰ But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go.

Again Pharaoh summoned Moses. He confessed his sin, begged forgiveness, and asked the prophet to pray that the plague be stayed.

When the prophet prayed, the Lord reversed the winds and drove all the locusts into the Red Sea.

Still, “the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” The plagues had not brought Pharaoh to the realization that he was not dealing with just some local idol, some god of a neighboring kingdom, against whom his gods could prevail. The plagues only served to make Pharaoh even more obstinate. We are dealing with an extremely proud man who is used to always getting his way.

The Ninth Plague: Darkness

Exodus 10:21 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.” ²² So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. ²³ They did not see one another, nor did anyone rise from his place for three days, but all the people of Israel had light where they lived.

Like the third and sixth plagues, this ninth judgment came without warning. When Moses extended his hand, the land was draped with a thick cloak of darkness lasting for three days, except in the land of Goshen. This plague seems designed to herald the tenth and final plague which occurred in the darkness of the night and involved the darkness of death.

The exact nature of the darkness is uncertain, but since Goshen was spared it could not have been an eclipse of the sun. Some interpret this darkness that can be felt to mean a massive sandstorm with its darkness and heat that would cause people to seek shelter. With the land bare from the loss of crops by hail and locusts, a sandstorm, possibly flowing from the south in March, would have been unusually fierce. What seems to be described here is what is called the *khamsin*, a sand storm of such proportions that the light of the sun was blotted out completely. For three days the Egyptians dared not leave the safety of their dwellings. Yet in the land of Goshen, there was light!

This plague was aimed at one of the chief Egyptian deities, the sun god Re, of whom Pharaoh was a representation. Re was responsible for providing

sunlight, warmth, and productivity. Other gods, including Horus, were associated with the sun. Nut, the goddess of the sky, would have been humiliated by this plague, as well as by the plagues of hail and locusts.

Exodus 10:24 Then Pharaoh called Moses and said, “Go, serve the Lord; your little ones also may go with you; only let your flocks and your herds remain behind.”²⁵ But Moses said, “You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.²⁶ Our livestock also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must take of them to serve the Lord our God, and we do not know with what we must serve the Lord until we arrive there.”²⁷ But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let them go.²⁸ Then Pharaoh said to him, “Get away from me; take care never to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die.”²⁹ Moses said, “As you say! I will not see your face again.”

In his misery, Pharaoh summoned Moses and said he was willing to let him leave with the people, but not with their flocks and herds. This was Pharaoh’s fourth attempted compromise. These animals, if retained, would help replenish Egypt’s loss of animal life in the fifth and seventh plagues. But Moses was uncompromising and replied, “Not a hoof is to be left behind”. He insisted that the people had been called to worship, and therefore, they would not leave behind any animals of sacrifice.

A belligerent Pharaoh ordered Moses out of his presence. Moses calmly replied that he would never return before him again. However, this seems to be contradicted by the confrontation Moses and Aaron had with Pharaoh later in chapter 12. This can be explained by understanding Moses to have said (in 10:29) that, because of Pharaoh’s raging, Moses would not go to him in mercy with a word from God. In other words, if Moses saw Pharaoh again, it would be to announce unavoidable judgment or it would be at Pharaoh’s request to grant Moses and the Israelites permission to leave the land.

Purpose of the Plagues

The plagues had momentous ramifications in five different areas.

1. The plagues were designed to discredit the gods of Egypt. Before the tenth plague God asserted, “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt” (Ex 12:12; cf. Nm 33:4). This is especially evident in the first, second, fifth, and ninth plagues. In the first plague, the sacred Nile was affected. By the end of the second plague, the Egyptians detested Ptha, the frog-headed god, and Heka, a frog goddess. Apis the sacred bull could not spare his kind from the ravishing effects of the murrain. Ra the sun god could not penetrate the darkness in which Yahweh wrapped Egypt in the ninth plague.
2. The plagues also served to discredit the religious leaders of Egypt. The counsel of Pharaoh’s wisest men and the sorcery and magic of his ministers could not prevent or remove the plagues. In the third plague, the magicians retreated from the contest. In the sixth plague, they were rendered unclean by the festering boils and thus disqualified from officiating in their priestly role.
3. The plagues revealed the impotence of Pharaoh as a ruler and god. His total lack of integrity, his stubbornness, arrogance, and mortality are clearly shown in the narrative. He was forced during the contest to offer four compromises to Moses, and in the end, he was compelled to release the Israelites.
4. With respect to the Israelites, the plagues were designed to free them from bondage and convince them of the sole divinity of Yahweh. They were a visual lesson of God’s awesome power.
5. The plagues were also God’s judgment on the land of Egypt for the years of mistreatment of his people.
6. The plagues were designed gradually to magnify the power of God. In the first two plagues, the power of God was imitated by the magicians. They, however, were unable to remove the plagues. In plagues three through six, the restrained power of God was manifested. God’s unbridled power was manifested in plagues seven through ten (9:14).

The above six purposes can be summed up in the word *know*. The contest began when Pharaoh declared that he did not *know* Yahweh. This word thereafter becomes a keyword in the narrative. Through the plagues, all parties would come to *know* Yahweh—Israel (6:7; 10:2; 11:7); the Egyptians (7:5; 14:4, 18); and Pharaoh (7:17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29). To *know*

Yahweh means to recognize him because of personal experience and then submit to his authority.

Where Are We Now?

From the three cycles of three plagues, the land lay in ruins. God had demonstrated His mighty power by showing the impotence of the gods of Egypt. And by devastating that powerful nation economically, He struck fear into the hearts of her populace. He had caused the Egyptians to be eager for the removal of the Israelites though Pharaoh was yet to be humbled. The 10th plague would bring great sorrow to *every* Egyptian family with children. This plague would result in the release of God's people.