

Moses: earth's meekest man

9. Plagues upon the land (Exodus 9–11)

John Mitchell

The contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh continues as plagues of increasing intensity come upon Egypt, but they serve only to confirm Pharaoh in his resistance against letting Israel go.

THE LAND OF EGYPT had now experienced four plagues—water into blood, frogs, lice, and flies—all of which had inconvenienced the people but none of which had sufficiently influenced Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go. With the fifth plague the emphasis shifted onto the beasts of the field, and thereby once more onto the gods of Egypt, for in the worship of Isis and her husband Osiris the cow and the ox were sacred. In fact, Isis, the goddess of fertility, was usually depicted as a woman with a cow's horns, between which was a disc of the sun.

A plague on the livestock

As previously, the plague did not come without warning. Immediately after the flies had been disposed of without repentance on the part of the king, Yahweh told Moses to go in to Pharaoh (he must surely have been the most unwelcome visitor the royal presence ever had!) and tell him, "This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews says, 'Let My people go so that they may worship Me',* the emphasis, as before, being that it was the God of the people of Israel Who was about to act, not any old god, as the magicians of Egypt had been insinuating. He it was Who was challenging both Pharaoh and the very idols on which he and his people relied for protection, and the fact would be demonstrated in the sparing of the Israelites from its effects when the next stroke came. But what form would it take this time?

The old English word 'murrain', not much used today and signifying a deadly plague, is used in the AV to describe the disease that God brought upon all the livestock of the Egyptians that were out in the fields: "If you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them back, the hand of the LORD will bring a terrible plague on your livestock", said Moses. No details are given of the disease or its symptoms, except to say that they were "very grievous" (AV), not being restricted

to one or two species but falling upon all beasts of the field that were useful to man, including horses, camels, donkeys, cattle, sheep and goats. Moreover, the stroke came at such short notice that it appears that few of

the owners had time to isolate their animals, even if they knew about it. "The LORD set a time and

* Scripture quotations are taken from the NIV unless stated otherwise.



Statuette of the goddess Isis, with cow horns on her head, between which is a disk symbolising the sun.

said, 'Tomorrow the LORD will do this in the land'". And the next day He did it. And, whilst the livestock of the Egyptians perished, not one animal of the Israelites died. Yet, although Pharaoh sent his officials into the areas inhabited by the children of Israel especially to ascertain this, his heart was still unyielding and he would not let the people go.

Boils on man and beast

Unusually, the next plague came without warning, and was as mysterious in its beginnings as it was devastating upon the persons of the Egyptians. Pharaoh must have wondered what Moses and Aaron were about when they appeared before him yet again, without words but with a demonstration. All Moses was doing was throwing dust in the air, in line with what Yahweh had told them to do: "Take handfuls of soot from a furnace and have Moses toss it into the air in the presence of Pharaoh. It will become fine dust over the whole land of Egypt, and festering boils will break out on men and animals throughout the land". And so it did, and the plague became so widespread that even the magicians could not stand before Moses, so painful and demoralising were the consequences. Thereafter they bowed out of the contest and are never heard of again.

Of still greater significance, however, was an effect upon the king himself, which has an application to all generations of those who seek to thwart the will of God. Hitherto Pharaoh had been motivated by his own stubbornness and pride in his resolve not to let the children of Israel go; now Yahweh would harden him so that, whatever the calamities to come, he would be unable to change his mind until he perished in the very exodus he had striven so hard to prevent. As the book of Proverbs says: "He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy" (29:1, AV).

In Pharaoh's case, just as the stubbornness and resolve not to acknowledge the supremacy of the God of Israel had been progressive, so also the hardening of his heart became ever more acute, even when his own people were beginning to acknowledge the reality of it all. The magicians had already admitted defeat, and before the



"The LORD sent thunder and hail, and lightning flashed down to the ground". (Picture: NOAA Photo Library)

next stroke came after a day's warning, the wise among the officials and the people gave heed and reacted.

The great storm

Moses was told to get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh once more with the message, "This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let My people go, so that they may worship Me, or this time I will send the full force of My plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth. For by now I could have stretched out My hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth".

From this statement we learn of God's wider intentions in humbling Pharaoh and bringing the plagues upon the land of Egypt. It was so that the power behind Moses and Aaron and the children of Israel would be known abroad, and go before them when they began their journey to the Promised Land. As Moses and Miriam sang later, "The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia. The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall upon them. By the power of Your arm they will be as still as a stone—until Your people pass by, O LORD, until the people You bought pass by" (Ex. 15:14-16).

And the nations would be terrified all the more by the severity of what was still to come, for it represented the 'full force' of the power

of God: “at this time tomorrow”, said Yahweh’s messenger to Pharaoh, “I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now. Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every man and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die”.

Thus, whatever the mind of Pharaoh, his officials and people who feared the Lord and regarded the welfare of their animals and the slaves who tended them were given a day in which to evade the treasures of the hail God had stored in the heavens ready for the outpouring on the morrow. In this way the wise had a means of escape but the foolish brought havoc upon themselves. At the appointed time Yahweh said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand towards the sky so that hail will fall all over Egypt—on men and animals and on everything growing in the fields of Egypt”. The storm was accompanied by the greatest display of heavenly pyrotechnics that Egypt had ever seen, as thunder roared and lightning flashed back and forth before striking the ground. Throughout the land the hail struck everything in the fields, both men and animals; it beat down everything growing, and stripped every tree. The only place where it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were.

Even the implacable Pharaoh was shaken as never before. He did not wait for Moses and Aaron to visit him; he summoned them himself to the royal palace. “This time I have sinned”, he said to them. “The LORD is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the LORD, for we have had enough thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don’t have to stay any longer”. At last! A recognition from the royal lips of the righteousness of the God of Israel, and the unrighteousness of the Egyptians who were holding His people in slavery! But was it sincere, and did it betoken a change of heart?

Moses did not think so, and voiced his certainty of Pharaoh’s insincerity. “When I have gone out of the city, I will spread out my hands in prayer to the LORD”, he said. “The thunder will stop and there will be no more hail, so you may know that the earth is the LORD’S. But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the LORD God”. Of course, he was right, for as soon as Moses spread out his hands in prayer to God and the hail ceased to pour down, Pharaoh sinned once more. He and his officials hardened their hearts. There would be

no national repentance led by the king this time, nor would he let the children of Israel go, just as the Lord had said through Moses.

Besides impressing the nations that would eventually stand in the way of the children of Israel when they journeyed to the Promised Land, the plagues of Egypt were also intended as signs to the Israelites themselves, signs to tell their children and grandchildren that their God was Yahweh, the God of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Locusts

So yet again Moses was told to go to Pharaoh, this time to say, “This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, so that they may worship Me. If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields. They will fill your houses and those of all your officials and all the Egyptians—something neither your fathers nor your forefathers have ever seen from the day they settled in this land till now’”. And with that dire warning, Moses turned on his heels and left the royal entourage as they discussed, with conviction, this latest threat to their welfare and prosperity.

Fearful because of what had gone before at the hands of the God of the Hebrews, Pharaoh’s officials took the unheard of step of challenging the king to accede to Moses’ request: “How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God. Do you not yet realise that Egypt is ruined?”.

Hurriedly Moses was recalled to the court to face a more conciliatory-sounding king: “Go worship the LORD your God”, he said. “But just who will be going?” Moses answered, “We will go with our young and old, with our sons and daughters, and with our flocks and herds, because we are to celebrate a festival to the LORD”. At this notice of intent, and of the extent of the proposed exodus, Pharaoh’s countenance changed, and he became sarcastic: “The LORD be with you—if I let you go, along with your women and children! Clearly you are bent on evil. No! Have only the men go; and worship the LORD, since that’s what you have been asking for”. And with that Moses and Aaron were as hurriedly driven out of Pharaoh’s presence as they had been readmitted to it.

There was now no cause for further delay on the part of Moses. He stretched out his staff over Egypt, and Yahweh made an east wind blow across the land all that day and all that night. By morning, from the great wide spaces of Arabia, came the most fearsome cloud of locusts that Egypt had ever known. They covered all the ground until it was black, and devoured all that was left after the hail. Nothing green remained on tree or plant in all the land. This catastrophe of the first magnitude for the welfare of all the inhabitants brought a panic response from Pharaoh. He summoned Moses and Aaron in haste and said, "I have sinned against the LORD your God and against you". (Was their inclusion in his confession a further evidence of the grinding down of this despot, or an acknowledgement that only through them could the plague be revoked?) So he pleaded with them to forgive his sin and pray to Yahweh their God to take this deadly plague from him.

Accordingly, when he had left Pharaoh, Moses prayed to Yahweh, and He changed the wind to a very strong westerly that caught up the locusts and carried them into the Red Sea, where every last one of them perished. But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he still would not let the children of Israel go.

Darkness

The time for further warnings was past. There would be no more opportunities for repentance. The Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand towards the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt—darkness that can be felt". Such velvety darkness cannot have been the experience of many of our readers unless it was induced, as by potholers when they extinguish their light. In the case of the land of Egypt the darkness that descended was total and lasted for three days. The Scriptures do not explain the cause, but most commentators attribute it to a great sandstorm carried from the desert by a strong wind known as the *chamsin*. Geikie describes it as follows:

"In the desert it raises vast whirlwinds of sand, which sometimes bury entire caravans. Indeed they once overwhelmed the whole army of Cambyses, sent against Amon, so completely, that it disappeared as if swallowed up by the waves of the sea. It is always attended with a thickness of the air, through which the sun sheds only at best a dim yellow light; even this passing in many cases into complete darkness. On these occasions the people in the towns and

villages shut themselves up in their houses, in the innermost apartments, or in underground cellars, if there be any, and those in the desert dig holes in the earth, or hide themselves in caves or pits, and await the end of the storm. Artificial light at such times is of little use, for it cannot pierce the opaque air".

Whether these conditions were the exact parallel of those the ancient Egyptians experienced is unclear. What the Scriptures do say is that no one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived, their God having delivered them from the spiritual darkness of this world that the Egyptian plague so profoundly represented.

Three days of it were sufficient to make Pharaoh suppliant enough to send for Moses once more and offer to make another concession: "Go, worship the LORD", he said. "Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind". All along, Pharaoh had schemed to retain his slaves, first by blank refusal to let them go, and latterly by some way of anchoring them. But the ploy did not work. Moses replied, "You must allow us to have sacrifices and burnt offerings to present to the LORD our God. Our livestock too must go with us; not a hoof is to be left behind. We have to use some of them in worshipping the LORD our God, and until we get there we will not know what we are to use to worship the LORD".

The king, however, was adamant concerning this last hold he might have had on his army of slaves. Once more the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to let them go. With mounting anger he said to Moses, "Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die".

The final threat

With a composure worthy of so great a servant of the Lord, Moses replied civilly but with certainty. "Just as you say", he said, "I will never appear before you again". And then he delivered Yahweh's final message to the king of Egypt, one of such disaster that Pharaoh apparently could not credit it: "This is what the LORD says: 'About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle

as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal’. Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying,

‘Go, you and all the people who follow you!’ After that I will leave”. Then Moses, now himself hot with anger, left Pharaoh.

And the king, brooding and vengeful, but with his heart hardened for the last time, went to bed, only to face a dawn of despair after the wrath of God had fallen upon him and his people.

(To be continued)

Your Letters



Zipporah and the circumcision

I would like to offer some comments on the above subject, following on from the letter published in February (p. 40). Although the incident recorded in Exodus 4:24,25 is certainly mysterious in itself, a couple of features of the wider narrative make it clear what the principal lesson is. The immediate context refers no less than three times to first-born sons:

“And the LORD said unto Moses . . . thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is My son, even *My firstborn*: and I say unto thee, Let My son go, that he may serve Me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even *thy firstborn*. And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of *her son*, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision” (vv. 21-26).

This suggests to me that the “him” in danger of death in verse 24 is not Moses but Moses’ first-born son, and that Moses and Pharaoh are placed in parallel positions. Each first-born lives or dies dependent on their father’s obedience to God’s command.

Looking at the wider context, we find the narrator deliberately ‘confusing’ the chronological and geographical locations. In verse 18 we are in Midian: “And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father in law, and said unto him, Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace”. In verse 19 we are still in Midian, but the Lord’s statement to

Moses that is recorded here must have preceded Moses’ request in verse 18: “And the LORD said unto Moses in Midian, Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead which sought thy life”. Verse 20 describes Moses’ journey to Egypt: “And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt: and Moses took the rod of God in his hand”. In verse 21 we are back in the wilderness, and this time the Lord’s statement explains why verse 20 mentions the rod: “And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go”. This brings us to the account of the incident itself in verses 22-26, already quoted, which takes place “by the way in the inn”, neither in Midian nor in Egypt.

The following verses return to the wilderness, “the mount of God”, in the place where Moses originally met Jethro’s family: “And the LORD said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him. And Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD Who had sent him, and all the signs which He had commanded him” (vv. 27,28). But note that the Lord’s words to Aaron predate any of the verses we have quoted, for Moses had been told as early as verse 14 that Aaron was already on his way to meet him. Finally we arrive in Egypt: “And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: and Aaron spake all the words which the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed: and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that He had looked upon