



# The Exodus

## A commentary on Exodus 1–15

### F. The first nine plagues (Exodus 7–10)

#### Part 1: Introduction (ii)

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**T**HIS IS THE second of two introductory articles examining issues which arise from the account of the first nine plagues upon Egypt. Three topics will be considered: the theme of creation, the gods of Egypt, and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

#### The Creation theme

Last month it was noted that there are ten plagues in total. But why that particular figure? The number ten has important Scriptural associations. It is the number of the commandments given to Moses, the life-giving words of God by which men and women were to order their lives and thus find life before Him. But, perhaps more to the point in the present context, it is the number of 'Divine fiats' spoken by God in Genesis 1. On ten occasions the opening Creation narrative (Gen. 1:1–2:3) proclaims, "And God said . . .", each saying ushering in a further element of God's creative work.

Each of the ten plague accounts likewise begins with the expression, "And the LORD said unto Moses . . .", and proceeds to describe a work of judgement and *destruction* (as opposed to *creation*) which would befall the Egyptians. Just as God brings creation into existence through speaking a set of ten creative words, so, too, God brings ruin upon Egypt through a sequence of ten words of judgement. In each case the words spoken by God translate into actions: actions of creation on the one hand, and acts of taking down and destruction on the other.

Just as God brought the world into being and ordered it through a set of ten creative utterances, so God would later ask man to live by a

sequence of ten utterances, spoken and then engraved by Him upon tablets of stone. Men and women were to organise and structure their lives on the basis of these ten commands. In our present narrative in Exodus we are being taught about the consequences of the disobeying of God's commands. God can build up, and He can take down. He can create, and He can remove.

In this sense, then, the plagues on Egypt represent a reversal of Creation. In the book of Exodus God undoes for Egypt what He had done for the world at large in Genesis 1. Human society and existence is not a one-way street, stretching for ever onwards. If it goes in the wrong direction, as it has done and does do, then God will take it apart and bring it to nothing so that His purpose may be furthered. What we are witnessing in Exodus is the 'un-creating' of Egypt (if we might term it that), the taking apart of sin and its works. This is how it will be again for the world at large when Christ returns.

This reversal of Genesis is brought home in further details of the plague accounts. Each of the nine plagues affects some part or other of the natural creation. As we saw [last month](#), many of the plagues are reminiscent of natural phenomena gone wrong, of nature and its processes 'out of control' (as man would see it), of God showing how fragile and susceptible to *His* control the natural world truly is. The beasts of the field are affected, the fish (of the river this time, rather than of the sea), the swarming and creeping things—even the distinction between day and night is blurred in the final plague of the nine.

Indeed, the first and last plagues of the nine bring out the point particularly starkly. The first

plague is the conversion of the Nile into blood. As well as being responsible for the fertility of the region (the Nile had a very obvious life-giving role in Egypt), the Egyptians also believed water was the primary element in creation. In Genesis also, the opening scene is one of the Spirit of God hovering upon waters, of the earth emerging from those waters, and of the waters above being divided from the waters beneath. In the first plague God takes that primary element, and illustrates that He wields absolute control over it. His is the power to give life, and His is the power to take.

The final plague of the nine similarly echoes Genesis 1. It is the plague of darkness, the *last* of the plagues to affect the natural world or habitat of the Egyptians. It corresponds to the *first* creative utterance of God in Genesis 1: "And God said, Let there be light". God has the power to create light and He has the power to create darkness.

The nine plagues contain further echoes of creation language, one of the more obvious being as follows (it is the plague of locusts which is being described):

"For they covered *the face of the whole earth*, so that *the land* was darkened; and they did eat *every herb of the land*, and *all the fruit of the trees* which the hail had left: and there remained not *any green thing* in the *trees*, or in the *herbs of the field*, through all the land of Egypt" (Ex. 10:15).

From all this we learn that God is indeed the God of life and creation, but He is also a God Who is capable of reversing those processes, and Who will do so when man forsakes Him.

### The gods of Egypt

It has often been pointed out that the plagues upon Egypt are theological attacks upon her gods. God mocks the false gods of Egypt and makes a show of them openly by the very plagues which He sends. Let me give three examples to illustrate:

- The first plague is the conversion of the Nile into blood. Osiris was the god of inundation, and, as has already been remarked, water was regarded both as a primitive element of creation and also as a source of life for the Egyptians. There was also a god of the Nile, by the name of Hapi. But God shows His power to be greater than both of these gods by the control which He exercises over the water of the river through the hand of Moses.

- The second plague, the plague of frogs, also appears to be directed against an Egyptian god. The goddess of midwifery took the rather bizarre form of a frog. Pharaoh's dominion is upset by a multitude of frogs, just as his predecessor's plans had been thwarted by the action of two faithful midwives in Exodus 1.
- The ninth plague, the final plague of the main cycle, is the plague of darkness. Re, the sun god, was one of the chief gods of the Egyptian pantheon. Yet the true God can, in an instant, bring to nothing Re's power to shine.

Further examples could perhaps be given, and it has been claimed that every single plague similarly attacks one of the Egyptian gods. Personally, I have not seen this demonstrated to my own satisfaction, though it may well be the case. In my view, since the Egyptians worshipped so many gods at various points in their history, one would have to demonstrate not only that each plague affected a known god's territory, but also that the nine or ten gods that were thus singled out were of particular significance as *prominent* deities within the Egyptian pantheon. This caveat does not, however, obliterate the basic point that some of Egypt's major gods are being parodied or attacked in the plague accounts.

### Pharaoh's hard heart

A theme that recurs with great frequency in the account of the plagues is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. After almost every single demonstration of God's power, Pharaoh reneges on his promise to allow the Israelites to depart. His heart, temporarily affected by the power of the plague, becomes hard and stubborn again. How can Pharaoh behave like this? How can he be so blind and stupid as to continue to harden himself while his country is being brought to its knees?

A matter of particular interest here is that two types of expression are used to describe what happens to Pharaoh's heart. In one set we find in the AV phrases such as, "and Pharaoh hardened his heart", or, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened", which read quite naturally as though Pharaoh himself is to blame for his stubborn behaviour and that it is he who stands behind it. However, in another group of passages, phrases such as, "and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart", are used, which quite clearly put God as the subject. In these latter passages it is God rather than Pharaoh Who is said to stand behind the effect

which takes place on Pharaoh's heart. How are we to understand this distinction?

In answering this it is tempting to go to one of two extremes, both of which must be avoided as being unfaithful to the text. These involve stressing one or other of these two sets of expressions, and bending the other set to mean basically the same thing as the first. For example, invoking the principle of free will, one could claim that Pharaoh must be responsible for his own actions (as the first type of expression states), and conclude that the "and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart" passages must mean basically the same thing (perhaps *God* does it in the remote sense that He brings about the plagues which cause the heart to become hard<sup>1</sup>). This argues that the two types of expressions are virtually synonymous, which seems unlikely since the distinction between them is obvious, systematic, and easy enough to spot by anyone who reads Exodus at all carefully. If the two sets of expressions meant the same thing then they would probably say the same thing. The other extreme is to emphasise the activity of God to such an extent that the principle of free will is overwritten.

Before suggesting an answer to this paradox, we need to look systematically at all the 'hardening' passages, of which there are many. This is complicated, because for each of our two types of passage (with Pharaoh and God respectively doing the hardening), two different Hebrew roots are used. These are the roots *kabad* (basic meaning 'to be heavy') and *chazaq* (basic meaning 'to be strong').<sup>2</sup> The table shows which word is used where, with 'P' indicating that Pharaoh does the hardening and 'G' that God does the hardening.

The table looks rather complicated, and perhaps not very interesting, until the pattern is spotted. Focusing on the passages in order, and observing the 'P's and the 'G's (who it is who is said to be doing the hardening), we find the following:

P P P P P P P { G P P } G G G G G G G

In other words, the 'P's cluster towards the beginning and the 'G's cluster towards the end. In fact, there are seven of each at the beginning and the end respectively, plus an overlapping in the middle in which we have first a 'G', then a reprisal, as it were, of the 'P's (although there are two 'P's, they are in consecutive verses in 9:34,35, and perhaps therefore count as one passage), before the sequence of 'G's commences in full flow. By this overlap at the centre, the 'P's and the 'G's are locked together, as it were, in an

	<i>chazaq</i> <sup>3</sup>	<i>kabad</i> <sup>4</sup>
7:13	P <sup>5</sup>	
7:14		P
7:22	P	
8:15		P
8:19	P	
8:32		P
9:7		P
9:12	G	
9:34		P
9:35	P	
10:1		G
10:20	G	
10:27	G	
11:10	G	
14:4	G	
14:8	G	
14:17	G <sup>6</sup>	

1. This is a somewhat weak suggestion, since God might be said to be behind virtually every human response and action in this remote sense. If I become angry because it rains when I want to go for a walk, does this mean that God in any sense at all 'makes' me angry because He sent the rain? Probably not.
2. A third root, *qashah*, is used in one passage with God as the subject (7:3). This will be ignored for the purposes of the table, as it occurs before the narrative of the plagues themselves has begun. The root *qashah* also occurs in 6:9 ("cruel bondage") and 13:15 ("when Pharaoh would hardly let us go").
3. The root *chazaq* also occurs in 4:21, with God as the One Who does the hardening. However, this is a prediction of what He will do, given at the time of the call of Moses, and so it does not belong with the occurrences in the plague accounts. There are many other fascinating instances of the root *chazaq* within Exodus 1-15. Some of these will be commented on elsewhere in the commentary, but it is worth providing a complete list:
  - 3:19 *mighty* hand
  - 4:4 *caught* it
  - 6:1 *strong* hand
  - 9:2 *hold* them still
  - 10:19 *strong* west wind
  - 12:33 Egyptians *were urgent* upon the people
  - 13:3 by *strength* of hand the LORD brought you out
  - 13:9 *strong* hand (as above)
  - 13:14 *strength* of hand
  - 13:16 *strength* of hand

interlocking pattern. Such overlapping sequences or structures are not unknown elsewhere in the Bible.

Having noticed the pattern, it remains to ask the deeper question, What of it? Quite a lot, as it turns out, for it provides the key to explaining what is going on in terms of the involvement of God and Pharaoh in the hardening process.

The plague narratives begin with a very clear emphasis on the stubbornness of Pharaoh himself. He is the one who, seeing the power of God displayed, turns his back and hardens his heart. The free will of Pharaoh is being emphasised in these passages as he flagrantly hardens his heart. This takes us as far as the first five plagues.

Then there is an overlap in plagues six and seven as first God, then Pharaoh once more, is said to be carrying out the hardening. At this point, therefore, a new dimension is introduced. God is the potter, and if He so wishes, He can make a vessel to dishonour. Pharaoh has already been given seven opportunities by this point, and by his own free will has chosen to harden his heart on every single occasion. Just as God sent an evil spirit upon Saul to hasten His purpose and bring about a particular effect which He desired (Saul having been given ample opportunity to serve God in the right way), and just as God 'gave over' His people unto their own hearts' lust (Acts 7:39-42; Rom. 1:24), so now God uses Pharaoh more as an object, as a piece of pottery, to show forth His glory. In fact, Pharaoh has shown himself so unworthy of God's grace that God can say that the only purpose of his existence is as a vehicle for God to illustrate His awesome power (compare Romans 9:17). Now God sends His plagues, not only on frogs and lice, but on the very heart of Pharaoh himself, leading to further intransigence and stubbornness on Pharaoh's part.

Does this mean that free will has gone out of the window and that Pharaoh is merely a puppet whom God props up and supports only that He might knock him down? No, for the very overlap in the 9:34,35 (in which it is stated once more that Pharaoh hardens his own heart) shows that Pharaoh is still involved. But the drama has quite clearly reached a new level, in which, Pharaoh having been given ample opportunity, God pushes him, as it were, towards his doom. For after the overlap of 9:34 the narrative records seven times that God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and never once is it again stated that Pharaoh did it. Pharaoh is now an implement which God

uses to illustrate what He wishes to illustrate about Himself and about His power. Pharaoh has no other role to play beyond this in the purpose of God.

One writer has used a canoeing analogy to help explain the interaction of God and Pharaoh in the hardening process, which some might find helpful. Imagine being in a canoe heading towards the brink of a waterfall. The flow of water is gradually narrowing and the current is getting stronger, but at any point you can turn the canoe away and bring it to shore. However, as you go on and on towards the brink the current gets ever stronger and you have less and less opportunity to turn aside. To do so will command greater and greater effort. As you approach, the possibility of turning away becomes increasingly theoretical, for the current drives you on until ultimately there is nothing you can do but go over the brink. Pharaoh is the canoeist, repeatedly refusing to come to shore. Eventually he is caught in a current so strong that his own free will becomes increasingly irrelevant, and the current of God's purpose leads him to his destruction. It is not a perfect analogy, but it does make a useful point. The opportunities God gives us to exercise our free will and repent are there to be taken. Otherwise it may just be too late.

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4. There are many other fascinating instances of the root *kabad* within Exodus 1-15. Some of these will be commented on later, but here is a complete list:
    - 4:10 *slow* of speech . . . of a *slow* tongue
    - 5:9 let . . . *more* work *be laid* upon the men
    - 8:24 *grievous* swarm of flies
    - 9:3 *grievous* murrain
    - 9:18,24 hail, very *grievous*
    - 10:14 locusts . . . very *grievous*
    - 12:38 very *much* cattle
    - 14:4 I will be *honoured* upon Pharaoh
    - 14:17 I will get Me *honour* upon Pharaoh
    - 14:18 when I have gotten Me *honour* upon Pharaoh
  5. 7:13 is mistranslated in the AV. The Hebrew construction is identical to 7:22; 8:19 and 9:35, in which the AV quite rightly understands Pharaoh to be the one hardening his heart. For some reason it incorrectly makes 7:13 read as if God is doing the hardening. He is not; it is Pharaoh.
  6. For those who know Hebrew, the following verbal forms are used:
    - for *chazaq*: piel in all instances in which God is subject; qal for all cases in which Pharaoh is subject, including 7:13;
    - for *kabad*: hiphil in all cases except 9:7, which is qal (the subject being 'the heart of Pharaoh'), and 7:14, which uses a different form of the root.