



The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

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

Part 1: Introduction (i)

Mark Vincent

THIS ARTICLE begins a study of the plagues upon Egypt which will span a few months. It introduces some of the major issues that arise from the narrative of Exodus 7–10 by asking four basic questions:

- Why does God take so long before destroying Pharaoh?
- How many plagues were there?
- Is there a pattern to the plague narratives?
- How was it all done?

In a second introductory article ([next month](#), God willing) we shall look at a further three topics:

- How and why is the theme of creation used in the plague accounts?
- Do the plagues constitute an attack on the gods of Egypt?
- What is meant by the hardening of Pharaoh's heart?

These two introductory studies will be followed by the usual commentary upon the text itself, just like the earlier articles in this series.

Why does God take so long?

The first question is, why have a sequence of plagues at all? God is quite capable of destroying the Egyptians instantly in order to lead out His people; He could easily bring the climactic tenth plague, the death of the first-born, into first place, thus dispensing with the other nine. But He does not do this. He takes His time, and leads Pharaoh through a protracted sequence of plagues. Why?

I think the basic reason is that God wants to lead His people through a *demonstration*. He wants to *show* them once and for all what Pharaoh

is like (and, by contrast, He wants to show them what *He* is like). This contention can be illustrated through a series of points:

- With the exception of the final plague, in which Passover observance was required, Israel has no active role in the plagues. Instead she has to sit back and watch as *God* does what He has to do. Israel is in the background; she cannot defeat Pharaoh herself. She has to look and learn. She has to wait God's time and pleasure. She has to be patient while God does things the way *He* wants to do them. She is totally dependent on Him, just as all men are dependent upon God for deliverance from their sins.
- Although Pharaoh is nothing in comparison with God (a point Israel should have known, at least in theory), in practice Israel needs to be brought to appreciate the point more acutely. For this reason God gradually steps up the pressure against Pharaoh, allowing the fact of His supremacy to dawn gradually upon His people.
- Despite Pharaoh's smallness when compared with God, the fact remains that when a man is under the grip of Pharaoh's power it can still seem formidable—even insurmountable. Although God could have eradicated Pharaoh at the first instant, He allows the king to appear stronger than he really is for a while, so that man can re-experience the struggle he feels in his own life. This is done for man's benefit, since Pharaoh *seems* to be a big obstacle to man, even though he is trivial to God.
- From a human point of view, the protracted struggle of the plagues thus makes the

important point that the victory over sin is not won easily. It was not won easily for Christ, for he had to battle every single day of his life against temptation. Neither will it be won easily in our own lives. Victory can only be attained in God's strength.

- As the plagues progress, the same sequence of events repeats itself (command—warning—plague—Pharaoh's repentance—and, finally, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart returning us to square one). Through this repetition the narrative increasingly takes on some of the elements of a farce. Pharaoh's position is increasingly mocked, and his absurd behaviour is lampooned for all to see. The plagues enable us to see Pharaoh for what he is. Pharaoh is a fool.
- But he is not a fool to be pitied. Pharaoh tries every trick in the book to retain his control over the Israelites. He attempts bargaining, he feigns repentance (or perhaps he really does repent for a while), and he undertakes flat refusal. This is the sort of person he is, obsessed with power and the lust for control, one who can never have enough. Who wants to serve such a master? No one (in principle); yet how many content themselves with doing so and never long for anything more?

These ideas can be extended to make some very important spiritual points.

- Pharaoh cannot be trusted or bargained with; there is no possibility of striking a deal with him or reaching a compromise. This is a crucial point, yet one which would have been questioned had we not gone through the repetitive sequence of plagues in order to see just what Pharaoh was like. As humans, we are often tempted to compromise, to think that there might be peaceful coexistence with sin, a way of doing a deal or striking a bargain with the values and demands of this world. But this is not possible.
- Pharaoh is so determined to keep control over his subjects that there can be no peace for Israel until he is utterly destroyed. Pharaoh has to be obliterated, and so does the dominion of sin in this world. It is an all-or-nothing exercise.
- The implications of this must be worked out in our personal lives. Sin and temptation will not let go of us of their own free will—we have to leave them behind.
- Pharaoh and those who implement his dominion are coming to nothing. They are head-

ing for ruin because they worship their own will and are not prepared to accept God's authority. Since this is the case, there is no point in serving Pharaoh and doing those things which he wants us to do. There could scarcely be a stronger imperative to encourage us to stop listening to Pharaoh and to pay more attention to God.

How many plagues were there?

The second question to be considered may be dealt with much more briefly. What counts as a plague? What does not? And is there any significance in the total number?

For present purposes, a plague may be defined as a Divinely ordained disastrous event which strikes the Egyptians at large. For this reason, the conversion of Aaron's rod into a serpent and the transformation of Moses' leprosy hand (recorded in the first half of Exodus 7) are not plagues. They do not affect the people at large, and they do not inflict harm (except the loss of the staves of a few of Pharaoh's courtiers). A plague is usually, though not always, preceded by an appeal from Moses that Pharaoh should let God's people go. It is usually followed by Pharaoh's agreement, after which he hardens his heart and refuses to do what he has promised.

Using this definition of a plague, there are ten in total (the significance of which will be examined in the next article). These ten are quite clearly made up of a group of nine, plus one. The final plague is quite separate from the previous nine, and will be dealt with in a separate section of this series. The narrative pace quite clearly slows down to mark the import of the last plague, just as it deliberately slowed at the end of chapter 6, by the insertion of a genealogy, to mark the beginning of the account of the nine plagues.

Patterns in the plagues

When the plagues are examined closely, it turns out that they conform to a very particular pattern (see [table](#) opposite). Focusing on the first nine plagues, there are in fact three groups of three; the tenth plague stands apart in every way.

The first plague of each group (labelled 'a' in the table) is always initiated in the morning. Moses is commanded to go to meet Pharaoh when he comes to the river, and Pharaoh is warned that if he does not let Israel go, then a particular plague will come upon him.

Group 1	
1	a) Nile into blood
2	b) frogs
3	c) lice
Group 2	
4	a) swarm (of flies?)
5	b) murrain (cattle disease)
6	c) boils
Group 3	
7	a) pestilence
8	b) locusts
9	c) darkness
The tenth plague	
10	death of the first-born

In the second plague of each group (labelled 'b') Moses goes to address Pharaoh in the royal palace. Once again Pharaoh is warned of the impending plague if he refuses to let Israel go.

The third plague of each group ('c') stands apart from the other two. This time there is no command to "Let My people go". There is no warning of the impending plague. Moses simply brings the plague upon Egypt, and the plague which comes is probably to be regarded as the climax of the set of three.

The patterns do not stop there. Within each group of three there are always connections between the first two plagues ('a' and 'b'). For example, within the first group of three plagues, the first two plagues both cause a stink (7:18,21; 8:14), the third does not; the first two are copied by Pharaoh's magicians (7:22; 8:7), the third is not. In the second group of three plagues, God makes a division in the first two plagues between Israel and Egypt (8:22,23; 9:4,6), whereas in the third plague no division is mentioned. In the third group of plagues, the first two plagues are sent against Pharaoh's heart (9:14-17; 10:1), whereas this is not mentioned in the third plague. After the first two plagues Pharaoh confesses his sin (9:27; 10:16,17); after the third he does not.

What do we learn from the patterns? At a general level, we see another example of the intricacy of the Word of God—that there is always more behind the surface than appears at first glance. More pertinent to the message of Exodus itself, however, is the point that God's activities—even His activities of judgement and destruction—are purposeful and ordered. Even when He is pulling down that which is wicked,

His works are not random and chaotic, but rather patterned and constructive. God is bringing Egypt to its knees for a positive purpose, and He does so in such a way as to show that He has a plan and that He has points to make and instruction to give. Even in the very organisation of the plague accounts there is rhyme and reason; there is no swipe of God's hand which is out of place or made 'just for the sake of it'. At every turn there is instruction to be gleaned and lessons to be learned.

How was it done?

Exodus does not specify how the plagues were carried out, beyond the fact that (for example) Moses lifted up his staff or spread out his arms towards heaven. We are given no more physical information about how the swarms of flies were produced than we are about how five loaves and two fishes fed 5,000 in the Gospels; if we take Exodus seriously then the plagues must be a matter of faith. Given the lack of interest in the mechanical aspects of the plagues in the text itself, it would be a mistake to devote great space to it (I take it that the text focuses our attention on things on which God wants us to concentrate). Nevertheless, since it is an area which has aroused considerable interest, some comment must be made.

Exodus makes it obvious that the plagues were miraculous, and that they occurred at precisely the point when God wished them to occur. Nevertheless, it has been noted that the majority (all?) of the first nine plagues represent heightened or extreme forms of natural phenomena that have been experienced periodically in that part of the world. From time to time there are plagues of frogs, locust swarms, swarms of flies, freak storms, and the like—common sense and rudimentary knowledge of Middle Eastern geography would tell us this, and historical accounts provide verification. Even the plagues which initially may appear to be less 'natural' can be explained on this sort of basis (though not all would accept the 'explanations').

We shall examine the details of each plague in the commentary of later articles, but two examples may briefly be cited. In a year of particularly heavy rainfall the inundation of the Nile may be extreme, apparently bringing with it red earth and organisms suspended in the water which make the water deep red in colour and render it unpalatable (the Hebrew for 'the water became blood' would be understood in the sense

'the water became bloody' on this reading, the reference being to the red colour rather than literal blood). Similarly, the plague of darkness may be 'explained' as a particularly severe type of desert storm known as the *khamsin*, in which the air becomes so thick with dust that there is a great darkness and the sun cannot be seen. Could Exodus be saying that the ninth plague was the worst *khamsin* that had ever been known in history?

There is no doubt that God does use the natural elements of creation which are at His disposal to bring about His purpose. There are other Scriptural examples in which God uses weather, hail and wind to bring about His purpose, and there is no intrinsic reason why He should not do so in the Exodus.¹ Supporters of this approach to the plagues would argue that to understand the plagues as exaggerated and precisely timed versions of natural phenomena in no way minimises the miraculous nature of what happened, for the miracle lies in the precision of God's timing (when Moses lifts up his rod, for instance), and in the concentration of so many freak phenomena in such close proximity. Nevertheless, it must also be pointed out that many of these 'natural' explanations will have been put forward by those who want to 'explain away' the plagues (this does not of itself make them wrong, of course), and some may feel that it does not really do full justice to the text of, say, the plagues of blood and darkness.²

Others have gone yet further in seeking to explain the plagues by reference to natural phenomena. Starting with the assumption of heavy rainfall and high inundation of the Nile, they have linked the nine plagues together in a chain of events in which each leads into the next, and in which there seems to be either a causative or a chronological progression. This works in the following kind of way (numbers in brackets refer to the plague numbers):

- Heavy rainfall causes high flooding of the Nile around September
- High flooding means more red earth and bacteria suspended in the soil, causing a 'bloody' Nile [1]
- Fish die because of bacteria in the Nile; they die and decompose causing disease (anthrax)
- Infected frogs leave the river because of unpalatable water and die rapidly [2]
- Lice/mosquitoes multiply because of favourable breeding conditions at the time of the high Nile [3]
- Frogs die of anthrax, and flies multiply because of the dead frogs and fish [4]
- Cattle are now infected by the anthrax, perhaps carried into the fields by frogs [5]
- The boils are skin anthrax carried by the flies from infected carcasses of frogs and cattle [6]
- Heavy storms are typical of early February in the region [7]
- The heavy rainfall which caused the high Nile in the first place would make conditions favourable for a locust plague by March [8]
- The *khamsin* dust storm would be fuelled by the dust from the now dried-out flooded areas of the Nile valley. These storms typically last three days [9]
- We are now in the right sort of time period for Passover and plague [10]

This kind of scheme was documented at length in two academic articles of the fifties,³ and has been reproduced in much briefer form in more popular works such as the IVP Bible Dictionary.⁴ Though it is claimed as a 'discovery' of the 60s, in fact similar ideas were in circulation much earlier.⁵

I am competent neither as a geographer nor a biologist to evaluate this theory. It has found wide acceptance, and once again one can argue that with respect to each plague it is the timing which is the miracle. Nevertheless, to an un-

1. For a helpful general introduction to the topic, see Tony Benson, *Stormy Wind Fulfilling His Word* (Torrans Park: CSSS, 1983).
2. Another method of explanation involves positing a cataclysmic natural disaster such as a volcanic eruption which brings about the freak conditions of the plagues. Velikovsky, whose theories have been referred to and evaluated in *The Testimony* at various points in the magazine's history, was a proponent of this view. It is much less of a consensus view, and in my (admittedly limited) knowledge of it, seems to fit the details of Exodus less convincingly.
3. G. Hort, *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 69 (1957), pp. 84-103, and 70 (1958), pp. 48-59. Incidentally, Hort did not accept the miracle of the death of the first-born, and her attempt to explain the text in a different way is bizarre and clearly to be rejected.
4. *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (3 vols; Leicester: IVP, 1980), article by K. A. Kitchen under "Plagues of Egypt". Nahum Sarna's helpful work, *Exploring Exodus—The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1987) provides a much less convincing presentation.
5. For example, *Hastings Bible Dictionary*, under "Plagues".

trained eye some of the connections look somewhat tenuous, and I remain unconvinced that there is or has to be this chain-like connection between all the events. Such theories appear to me to be attempts to minimise the miraculous, even if they may claim otherwise. I am much more comfortable accepting the general principle that God uses the natural elements of creation to bring about His will, than I am arguing for a chain-scheme like that just presented.

What is certainly clear is the fact that, although the first nine plagues all involve natural phenomena, the final plague of the death of the first-born is completely unparalleled in all our extensive knowledge of world history. As the final act of deliverance to bring about His people's release, God produced something which was incontrovertibly unparalleled. His work of deliverance in the Lord Jesus Christ is no less unique.

The parables of Matthew 13

Peter Mercer

WHEN THINKING about the parables of Matthew 13, it is worth looking at the context and the reason behind the words that Jesus spoke. For example, the Parable of the Mustard Seed is often said to be about the coming Kingdom that our Father will soon establish on this earth, but in the context of Matthew 13 is this the case?

We note firstly that all the parables, with the exception of the Sower, are prefixed with the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is like". The word 'kingdom' is short for the 'king's dominion' or the 'dominion of the king'. This could have reference to the king's dominion both past, present (as it was in Jesus's day) or future.

In Matthew 13 we note that Jesus gave four parables to the multitude, and in doing so came "out of the house" (vv. 1-3). He spoke to them of the sower, the tares, the mustard seed and the leaven, then he sent the multitude away and went back "into the house" (v. 36) to give four more parables, this time to his disciples.

The phrase "into the house" may or may not be significant, but it certainly seems to divide the chapter into two halves. When Jesus was talking to the multitude he was speaking to people whose "heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed" (v. 15), and it was to the multitude that Jesus said not many days later: "Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled" (Jno. 6:26). So when we think about these first four parables, they seem to be set against the background of the king's dominion of the time, and reflected in some measure the corrupt state of the nation in the time of our Lord. They were condemnatory in content.

Parables to the nation

The Parable of the Sower is about division, a principle that we see throughout the Scriptures. God divides, by means of His Word, those who will hear from those who will not; the seed only flourishes on the "good ground" (Mt. 13:23).

The tares sown among the wheat show the opposition to the teaching of Jesus by his contemporaries, which was no different from that which the prophets had experienced many years before, and which we certainly in this country experience today.

I suggest, therefore, that the Parable of the Mustard Seed¹ is also one in which Jesus condemns his 'dominion' of the time. From the very small seed of faithful men had grown a kingdom that was corrupt, and blind to their Messiah. It had grown like the "green bay tree" of Psalm 37 to become full of wickedness (v. 35), unable to "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright" (v. 37), and, like the "green herb", would soon be cut down (v. 2). In fact, the whole psalm is relevant to his audience and their leaders. The birds of the air are also often spoken of in a bad sense. Abraham drove them away (Gen. 15:11), they are connected with Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:12) and the last of the kings of Judah (Ezek. 17:23), and perhaps the unclean birds of the nations that scavenge and tear (Jer. 15:3).

Leaven also is always spoken of in a bad sense. It was not to be used in any of the offerings, except one. It was a symbol of corruption, "the leaven of malice and wickedness" (1 Cor. 5:8);

1. The mustard seed is only referred to in two other places, in both of which Jesus reminds his disciples of their unbelief and lack of faith (Mt. 17:17-21; Lk. 17:5,6).