



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

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

Part 4: The second three plagues (8:20–9:12)

Mark Vincent

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **sub-sections** or **episodes** (these are typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest from the text. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional 'one-off' points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly.

Introduction

THE SECOND cycle of three plagues, like the first, has its own distinguishing features. The most notable of these is the theme of *differentiation* in plagues 4 and 5. Whilst it may be implicit in the earlier plagues that only Egypt was affected (this is a debatable point), in plagues 4 and 5 the text explicitly points out that God distinguishes between His people and the Egyptians. Egypt suffers; Israel does not. One of the ways this process is emphasised is through the use of the graphic word 'sever' (8:22; 9:4) as God severs the land of Goshen so that the Israelites come to no harm.

The original process of Creation took place through the making of distinctions as God divided the waters above from the waters below, and the light from the darkness. Differentiation is thus an integral part of God's creative work. In the Exodus God again illustrates His power to discern. God's judgements are carefully targeted, and will strike those for whom they are intended; those who are allied with the Lord will be safe.

Another point of contact between plagues 4 and 5 is the thoroughness with which God's judgements are accomplished. The flies come and then they go, and at the end *not one* remains (8:31). In the fifth plague *all* the cattle of Egypt die, and twice it is stated that of all the cattle of Israel *not one* was dead (9:6,7).*

The narratives of plagues 4 to 6 are much briefer than was the case for the first three, with things balancing out again with the longer plagues 7 to 9. In each cycle the third plague of the three forms the climax to the group.

Plague 4: The swarm

8:20 And the LORD said unto Moses, Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh; lo, he cometh forth to the water; and

* Other connections between plagues 4 and 5 include: a) the use of the expression "the LORD did so" to describe the execution of the plague (8:24; 9:6)—earlier plagues had been initiated by Aaron, and plague 6 will be carried out by Moses and Aaron—and b) the fact that both plagues were to take place "to morrow" (8:23; 9:5).

- say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Let My people go, that they may serve Me.
- 8:21 Else, if thou wilt not let My people go, behold, I will send¹ swarms² of flies upon thee, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thy houses: and the houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground whereon they are.
- 8:22 And I will sever³ in that day the land of Goshen,⁴ in which My people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there; to the end thou mayest know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth.
- 8:23 And I will put a division⁵ between My people and thy people: to morrow shall this sign be.
- 8:24 And the LORD did so; and there came a grievous swarm of flies into the house of Pharaoh, and into his servants' houses, and into all the land of Egypt: the land was corrupted⁶ by reason of the swarm of flies.
- 8:25 And Pharaoh called for Moses and for Aaron, and said, Go ye, sacrifice to your God in the land.
- 8:26 And Moses said, It is not meet so to do; for we shall sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians to the LORD our God: lo, shall we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, and will they not stone us?
- 8:27 We will go three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the LORD our God, as He shall command us.
- 8:28 And Pharaoh said, I⁷ will let you go, that ye may sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only ye shall not go very far away: intreat for me.
- 8:29 And Moses said, Behold, I go out from thee, and I will intreat the LORD that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people, to morrow: but let not Pharaoh deal deceitfully any more in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.
- 8:30 And Moses went out from Pharaoh, and intreated the LORD.
- 8:31 And the LORD did according to the word of Moses; and He removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; there remained not one.
- 8:32 And Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also, neither would he let the people go.

Comment

In parallel with the first plague, Moses goes to meet Pharaoh as he comes to the river. This time Moses is commanded to get up early in the morning, emphasising once more the new opportunity that is being granted.

The exact nature of the plague is debated, since the term rendered by the AV as 'swarm' does not occur anywhere else in this form. Notice that the AV adds the words 'of flies' in italics, indicating that this is an interpretation. The regular Hebrew word for fly is not used here, and the AV, in common with many other interpreters, assumes (quite reasonably) that the term used is either a collective for flies/insects, or else is an otherwise unknown term for a particular species of fly.

Another possibility is that it refers to an influx of marauding wild animals ([Note 2](#) gives the details on the various possibilities). The climate in northerly Goshen is quite different from the climate in the Nile region, and it may have been that God utilised this factor to determine the boundaries of a suitable habitat for the swarm.

It is worth focusing in a little more detail on the language of differentiation used in the passage. God will "sever" the land of Goshen, He says, and Egypt will know that He is God "in the midst of the earth" (v. 22). God occupies the centre, then, and discerns between those who are on His right hand and those who are on His left. Everything revolves around Him and the distinctions He makes. He will make a "division" (v. 23) between Egypt and Israel, and the word that is used here literally means a 'redemption' (see [Note 5](#)). There will be a dividing line, and those who are God's will be redeemed by Him and spared the suffering that will befall the Egyptians.

Temporarily defeated by the force of the plague, Pharaoh undertakes his first bargaining exercise with Moses. His first offer is that they offer sacrifice where they are, in situ, if sacrifice they must. This constitutes a new policy of religious tolerance on Pharaoh's part, but it is not sufficient. Moses' rejoinder about sacrificing the abomination of the Egyptians probably means that the sacrificing of particular cattle (perhaps sheep) was offensive to Egyptian cultural sensibilities (compare Genesis 46:34), and it is clear that what Pharaoh proposes would not be acceptable, either to Israelite or to popular Egyptian opinion. He asserts instead that they will go

three days journey before they sacrifice. It is possible that this is the time it took him to travel from his brethren to Mount Horeb when he originally fled.

Pharaoh therefore consents to allow Israel to go—but not too far! Now he is beginning to show more weakness, and for an instant it might be tempting to feel sorry for him. Yet as soon as Moses entreats the Lord at Pharaoh's request, and the plague is stayed, things are back at square one again, despite Moses' warning that Pharaoh must not deal deceitfully any more.

As Moses again intercedes for Pharaoh, the development of a wonderful partnership between Moses and his God can be seen. Moses is at home in God's presence and is accepted by Him; God does what Moses asks Him, just as Moses does what God commands. The relationship is one of mutual listening and response—on different levels, certainly, but the mutuality is beautiful nevertheless. Not one single fly (or wild animal) remains once Moses has prayed. This is a fine measure of how great God's commitment to faithful men and women will be, especially when they pray for the needs of others.

Plague 5: Death of the cattle

- 9:1 Then the LORD said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him, Thus saith the LORD God of the Hebrews, Let My people go, that they may serve Me.
- 9:2 For if thou refuse to let them go, and wilt hold them still,
- 9:3 Behold, the hand of the LORD is upon⁸ thy cattle which is in the field, upon the horses, upon the asses, upon the camels, upon the oxen, and upon the sheep: there shall be a very grievous murrain.⁹
- 9:4 And the LORD shall sever between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt: and there shall nothing die of all that is the children's of Israel.
- 9:5 And the LORD appointed a set time, saying, To morrow the LORD shall do this thing in the land.
- 9:6 And the LORD did that thing on the morrow, and all the cattle of Egypt died: but of the cattle of the children of Israel died not one.
- 9:7 And Pharaoh sent, and, behold, there was not one of the cattle of the Israelites dead. And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

Comment

This second plague of the three again contains a warning for Pharaoh of the forthcoming plague, but, just as was the case in the first cycle, Pharaoh makes no response.

And so the plague comes. It is a murrain, an old English word related to the French *mourir*, to die. In this context it refers to an infectious disease of cattle, perhaps carried by the flies of the previous plague. The plague will strike the animals which are in the field, and five species are singled out: horses, asses, camels, oxen and sheep. Perhaps other species were not affected; perhaps animals which were not out in the field remained unscathed (I say this because later plagues also affect the animals, so it is difficult to conclude that every single Egyptian animal perished, despite verse 6).

Pharaoh's response is interesting. He seems more concerned to find out whether or not it were really true that none of the Israelite cattle had died than he does about his own loss! The economic loss he and his people had suffered would have been massive; just think of the millions of pounds (both in money and weight) that were lost in the recent Foot and Mouth and BSE crises in the UK. Yet it is as if Pharaoh scarcely cares about this at all. He is more fascinated by what is going on next door amongst the Israelites. The issue is whether or not God is judge, whether behaviour does make a difference. But though Pharaoh's enquiry shows that the Israelites have come away unscathed, he cannot bring himself to change his course.

Plague 6: Boils

- 9:8 And the LORD said unto Moses and unto Aaron, Take to you handfuls of ashes of the furnace, and let Moses sprinkle it toward the heaven in the sight of Pharaoh.
- 9:9 And it shall become small dust in all the land of Egypt, and shall be a boil breaking forth with blains upon man, and upon beast, throughout all the land of Egypt.
- 9:10 And they took ashes of the furnace, and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses sprinkled it up toward heaven; and it became a boil¹⁰ breaking forth with blains upon man, and upon beast.¹¹
- 9:11 And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils; for the boil was upon the magicians, and upon all the Egyptians.

9:12 And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had spoken unto Moses.

Comment

There are a number of parallels between this plague and plague 3, the parallel climactic plague of the first cycle, the plague of lice:

- Each contains no warning; it simply befalls the Egyptians and they have no choice.
- The third plague concerns the dust of the land, the sixth ashes from the fire. Egypt is described elsewhere in Scripture as an iron furnace, and it is as if the Israelites were the fuel for their fire, even as they toiled at the brick kilns. But now the ashes of the fire are to be transformed and heaped upon the Egyptians' own heads. Egypt now reaps the fruit of the labour and burning to which she has subjected the Israelites. The ash becomes a boil, with blains and eruptions breaking forth on man and beast.
- At the third plague the magicians recognise they have met their match and acknowledge the miracle as the finger of God. At the sixth plague the magicians are again conspicuous—but this time by their absence. They cannot even stand before Moses—either they are too embarrassed or in too much pain—and they withdraw from the contest, as it were, totally defeated and unable to take further part.

On the basis of the latter point, it turns out that at the end of the second cycle of plagues we have arrived at a different place from that where we left the first. Moses has won his contest against the magicians by default; there is no possibility of them copying the miracles any more, for they have been utterly surpassed and cannot even stand up in Moses' presence.

Pharaoh is increasingly isolated in his intransigence, and it is at this point, at the conclusion of the second set of three plagues, that we read for the first time that the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart (9:12). It is almost as though the magicians, no longer able to stand themselves, cannot now give Pharaoh moral support and prop him up in his stubbornness. Pharaoh is scarcely strong enough to show the required resistance on his own, but God has not finished with him yet in making His point and so becomes involved Himself in the hardening process. The hardening of God will be a vital theme through the final plague cycle.

1. **v. 21 I will send.** There is a play on words here. The two expressions "let My people go" and "I will send" both use the same Hebrew root *shalach*, to send. "Let My people go" is literally "Send My people", and if Pharaoh does not, then God will do some sending of His own. He will send the 'swarm'.
2. **v. 21 swarms of flies.** The term "swarm" is the Hebrew *arob*, which generally means 'mixture' or 'mingled' (compare 12:38); the term 'Arab' today literally means a 'mixed' or 'mingled' people. One ancient interpretative tradition states that various kinds of wild animals (a mixture!) came and plundered the Egyptians (hence AV margin, "a mixture of noisome beasts"). Alternatively, the term could be taken as a collective, like the AV's 'swarm', perhaps a collective for insects or a particular species of fly. Or the term may be an otherwise unknown term for a particular type of insect. Various possibilities have been suggested along these lines. One is the common fly, used as a symbol of Egypt in Isaiah 7:18 (but there a different, known word for 'fly' is used, *zebub*, as in Baalzebub). The Septuagint understands the term to refer to a dog fly or stable fly, a vicious blood-sucking insect which is known to transmit anthrax and other animal diseases. Another option is a reference to the beetle (the Egyptian term *abeb* may be related). Or again, advocates of the plague-chain theory (where all the plagues are interconnected) opt for the species *Stomoxys calcitrans* which could transmit anthrax, likes houses and stables, and could have multiplied rapidly as the Nile receded. The fact is that we do not know the precise nature of this plague. The word is also found in Psalm 78:45 and 105:31.
3. **v. 22 sever.** The root *palah* occurs twice more in the plague narratives: 9:4, 'sever', and 11:7, 'put a difference' (but compare [Note 5](#)). Its two other occurrences in the Old Testament are also interesting: Exodus 33:16, 'separated', and Psalm 4:3, 'set apart'. In every instance it is God Who does the distinguishing, separating those who are His for Himself.
4. **v. 22 Goshen.** This appears to be a Semitic rather than an Egyptian word (though the point is debated) and probably derives from the Hebrew *gush*; see Job 7:5, where it is translated 'clod'—a reference to a type of earth. The exact location is not certain, though it is highly likely to have been in northern Egypt east of the Nile. It was plainly very fertile (Gen. 45:10,18). The

- term is used only here and in 9:26 in Exodus, but is common at the end of Genesis when the family of Jacob takes up residence there. There is also an (unrelated) city of Israel and a district of Israel with the same name.
5. **v. 23 division.** The root *padah*, meaning 'to redeem' (cf. 13:13; a different word is used in 6:6), suggests that the correct translation is 'a redemption' (so AV margin). Some authorities suggest changing the consonants to *p-l-t*, from the root *palah* which means 'to separate', 'distinguish' (this root is used in verse 22, translated 'sever', see [Note 3](#) above). The Septuagint and AV body text follow this approach.
 6. **v. 24 corrupted.** This term, *shachat*, 'be destroyed', 'corrupted', is used four times in the Flood narrative, to describe firstly the corrupt state of the earth and then God's consequent plan to destroy it (Gen. 6:11,12,13,17). It is possible that there is a deliberate echo here.
 7. **v. 28 I will let you go.** The 'I' here is emphatic, as though Pharaoh did not like the idea that God was doing the commanding (see v. 27), and now wanted to emphasise that it was still only down to his own magnanimity in giving permission that the Israelites could go! Moses deliberately picks up on this and throws Pharaoh's 'I' back at him in verse 29 by giving him an 'I' of his own. Moses also mimics Pharaoh's use of the term *raq*, 'but', 'only'. Pharaoh says 'but don't go too far away!'; Moses says 'only don't be deceitful any more!'
 8. **9:3 the hand of the LORD is upon.** Literally, 'the hand of the LORD will strike'. The word 'strike' here, *hoyah*, may be a play on YHWH.
 9. **v. 3 murrain.** A plague (in this case on the cattle). The word, probably coincidentally, has the same consonants as the Hebrew *dabar*, 'word', 'thing'. A parallel Arabic word means 'departure', 'death'. The term is also used to describe the seventh plague (hail), and is translated 'pestilence' (v. 15).
 10. **v. 10 it became a boil.** The connection between Moses sprinkling the ash before Pharaoh and the sudden eruption of boils throughout Egypt is evident in the text. The wording seems to exclude the possibility of a naturalistic explanation that anthrax (perhaps the root cause of the previous plagues) simply spread to humans. Moses sprinkled the dust in Pharaoh's presence so that Pharaoh could see that what transpired was totally miraculous and came because of what Moses did.
 11. **v. 10 beast.** The cattle had already been afflicted in plague 5, but evidently not all have yet died. In fact, the word *behemoth* used here was not used regarding plague 5, so there *may* be a distinction in which types of animal were affected. Animals will be affected again in plague 7, the plague of hail.



Encounter

Reprinted items from earlier issues, chosen by
the Publishing Editor

The Law given through Moses*

16. Prophetic shadows

Islip Collyer

BEFORE CONSIDERING the last and most joyous of the feasts under the Law, the Feast of Tabernacles, it seems desirable that we should deal with the solemn event which preceded it, the great Day of Atonement. And before examining this central feature of the Law it seems necessary to have clearly in mind the instructions given from Mount Horeb. We need to remember the basis of the elaborate ritual, for we have definitely come to the great parable

in types, shadows, allegories and ritual prophecy.

If it should happen that any reader of these lines is definitely unbelieving, unwilling to admit even the possibility that there was a deeper meaning in these matters, we may suggest that there is still a reason for reading carefully, for

* First published April 1948.