



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

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

Part 3: The first three plagues—Exodus 7:14–8:19 (i)

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.

Since the symbolism of the first plague is particularly rich it will take a whole article to deal with. Plagues 2 and 3 will be dealt with next month, God willing.

Plague 1: Waters into blood

- 7:14 And the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the people go.
- 7:15 Get thee unto Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goeth out unto the water;¹ and thou shalt stand by the river's brink against he come; and the rod which was turned to a serpent² shalt thou take in thine hand.
- 7:16 And thou shalt say unto him, The LORD God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness: and, behold, hitherto thou wouldest not hear.
- 7:17 Thus saith the LORD, In this thou shalt know³ that I am the LORD: behold, I will smite with the rod that is in Mine hand⁴ upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood.
- 7:18 And the fish that is in the river shall die, and the river shall stink; and the Egyptians shall lothe to drink of the water of the river.
- 7:19 And the LORD spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters⁵ of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone.

Introduction

THE FIRST cycle of plagues consists of the waters turning into blood, the plague of frogs, and the plague of lice. In each plague of the three Aaron is to "smite" with his stretched-out rod (7:20; 8:5,6,16,17); in each there is a telling comment that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart takes place "as the LORD had said" (7:22; 8:15,19).

Yet it is the first two plagues which contain the closest parallels, as the [table](#) opposite shows. Whereas these two plagues involve the waters, the third involves the dust of the earth; whereas the first two cause a stench and are copied by the court magicians, the third has no smell and is not reproducible.

Waters into blood	Frogs
<p>“And the LORD spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood” (7:19)</p>	<p>“And the LORD spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch forth thine hand with thy rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt” (8:5)</p>
<p>“And the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments: and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened” (7:22)</p>	<p>“And the magicians did so with their enchantments, and brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt” (8:7)</p>

- 7:20 And Moses and Aaron did so, as the LORD commanded; and he lifted up the rod, and smote the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants; and all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood.
- 7:21 And the fish that was in the river died; and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink of the water of the river; and there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.
- 7:22 And the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments: and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, neither did he hearken unto them; as the LORD had said.
- 7:23 And Pharaoh turned and went into his house, neither did he set his heart to this also.
- 7:24 And all the Egyptians digged round about the river for water to drink; for they could not drink of the water of the river.
- 7:25 And seven days were fulfilled, after that the LORD had smitten the river.

Comment

Plagues 1, 4 and 7 each take place at the brink of the River Nile, a location that would seem to be significant. Pharaoh comes to the river’s edge early in the morning on a regular basis, most probably to officiate in some ceremonial rites, but Moses is there before him, standing in his way.

In one sense, therefore, Moses’ presence is an intrusion, an interruption in which he comes between Pharaoh and that which he wishes to accomplish. Moses is an obstacle to remind Pharaoh of his duty and obligation before God, but Pharaoh, in a manner which is common to humanity, does not want to be put off the course he has plotted for himself. It can be all too easy to ignore the sometimes rather obvious obstacles and interruptions God brings into our lives to encourage us to change our course—quite sim-

ply because we are too engrossed in going our own sweet way. It is the beginning of a new day for Pharaoh, a new opportunity to leave the past behind and to behave reasonably with respect to God’s request. But Pharaoh’s old routines and mindset are too entrenched for him to take the opportunity he is being granted.

In a sense Moses is symbolically trying to protect Pharaoh from himself. Pharaoh is trying to get to the *edge*—in this case to the brink of the Nile, to that point of transition from dry land to water—and Moses is trying to stop him. What does this edge or brink, this boundary between one form of matter and another, represent? Pharaoh’s coming to the edge may symbolise the game of brinkmanship with God which he will try to play throughout these chapters. He will be pushing God to the limit of His patience, testing the edge like a child discovering how far he can go before his parents will restrain him. But Pharaoh does not know what he is up against. He thinks that he has come merely to the interface between land and water, the banks of the river Nile. But the edge on which he stands and from which Moses tries to obstruct him is more frightening than he suspects; the drop is deeper than he can imagine.

For with God, things are not always as they seem with human eyes. Pharaoh thinks he has come to the river’s edge, a river to which he has come so many times before, a river before which he worships and which he recognises as the source of fertility for himself and his people. But the river may not be what it seems. In an instant Pharaoh will be negotiating a transition, not from land to water, but from water to blood. That *water*, to him a symbol of life, can at God’s choice become a river of blood, a river that spells certain death to all in Egypt should it remain in such a state. Pharaoh is standing at the interface between death and life. He can go no further than this; he has come to his limit and to a

domain that is purely the Lord's. He had better choose carefully.

These issues can and must be applied to ourselves. It is intrinsic to human nature to want to test the edge, to want to find out how far away from God we can go and still be considered to be 'in' in some sense, rather than to discover how close to Him it is possible to come. But the edge can be more terrible than we can know. God has put barriers up for us to protect us from ourselves, not so that we should crash-test them to discover how effective they are.

The miracle of turning the water of the river into blood was the final sign that God had originally given to Moses to convince his own people that God had sent him (4:9). This new miracle is of an altogether different scale; now all the waters of the land will become blood as Aaron's rod is stretched out.

Does it mean literal blood? Of course it could do, for God can do whatever He wants. The precise phrases that are used to describe the transformation are as follows:

"turned to blood" (v. 17)

"become blood" (v. 19)

"that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt" (v. 19)

"turned to blood" (v. 20)

"there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt" (v. 21).

For some, the force of these words is unquestionably literal. The waters become a mixture of plasma, red blood cells, white blood cells and so forth—a whole mass of protein, made up of the blood itself and the fish and animals that would die through lack of oxygen and create a bubbling stew of gas and decaying matter. Small wonder that the people "could not drink of the water" (vv. 21,24; cf. v. 18). The miracle required to eradicate this mess would need to be as phenomenal as the one that caused it.

Others will note that Pharaoh's magicians also turned water to blood by "their enchantments" (v. 22), and will note that, unless God aided them in doing so, this would have been impossible. This might suggest to them a less literal understanding of "become blood". They might compare the expressions "the moon [shall be turned] into blood" (Joel 2:31), and, "Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood" (Jno. 6:54), and determine that in these cases a literal interpretation is not desirable. They may note further that, although the miracle of the conversion of the waters into blood is recorded, there is no ac-

count of them being turned back again—a fact which is quite distinct from the majority of the plagues. They might take this as a hint that perhaps the river gradually went back to its normal state over a period of time, something quite impossible if literal blood is intended.

It all depends, therefore, on the extent to which one can take the phrases "turned to blood" and the like as a way of describing a physical fact about the new constitution of the river, or as the description of a phenomenon which language is totally beggared to describe. As mentioned in an earlier article, the phenomenon of the reddening of the Nile caused by the suspension of matter in the water, following a heavy inundation of the Nile delta (referred to as an 'algal bloom'), is by no means unknown. It is possible that this plague describes a particularly freak and sudden example of this phenomenon, perfectly timed at the behest of God. On this view, the river becomes so incredibly dark and red that the effect is best described as a conversion to blood. This would be sufficient for the water to become highly unpalatable—"the Egyptians shall lothe to drink of the water of the river" (v. 18)—and for the fish to die. The magicians of Pharaoh, by their trickery, also had a way of reddening clear water which produced an effect that appeared similar, although on a much more tiny scale.

Either way, the symbolism of the blood is mandatory. The life/death interface has already been alluded to, and it is there again in the use of the snake/rod which would bring about the miracle; notice that the text explicitly states that the rod to be used was the rod which had been transformed into a serpent (v. 15). That rod carried the power of life and death as the life-giving waters were smitten and the land was filled with the prospect of death. Moses would later erect a brazen serpent upon a pole (rod), so that the venomous bite of the snakes that had smitten Israel could be cured.

The bringing of death and the provision of healing and life are all in the Lord's power. Indeed, it is in the death of God's beloved Son that death is smitten and life may be found. So too, the control of life-giving waters and of the blood which symbolises life is in the hand of God. The Nile flowing with blood both looked back to the deaths of those male Israelite babies that had been cast into the river, and provided a portent of the flowing blood of Egypt's firstborn which was to follow and which would be the culmination of the entire plague cycle. Ultimately Phar-

aoh himself and all his armies would meet their doom in the waters of the Red Sea.

The occurrence of water and blood here are perhaps sufficient to make one suspect that sacrificial and baptismal imagery may be in the background. A river of blood is a horrifying thought, and the idea of life through death is equally hard to stomach at first. The stench caused by the decaying fish is brought out by the text, and the old man which is to be left behind at baptism is indeed a foul creature. In the beginning in Genesis the waters brought forth teeming fish, and now all those fish have died. That means, of course (I am speaking in symbolic terms since I do not know the actual processes that were involved), that there must have been a new creation of fish, and that new life must have come out of that water. In like manner a new man emerges from baptism, a new creation in Christ. This new man can rest in a clear conscience because of what God has done for him through Christ, and it seems to me a beautiful touch that the record concludes with the remark that “seven days were fulfilled, after that the LORD had smitten the river” (v. 25).

The passage concludes, rather sadly, with the response of Pharaoh. Notice that he “turned [away] and went into his house” (v. 23). He did not “set his heart” to what had been done; his attention is held only for a brief moment and then he turns his back. He turns away from the strange and the incomprehensible to the familiarity of his own home. He is not going to be destabilised, even by something so great as this.

His people, in their turn, are too busy digging in the ground to consider the implications of what has been done. The human capacity to ignore the obvious is truly remarkable!

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1. **v. 15 he goeth out unto the water.** Why Pharaoh does this is not stated. If the time referred to is that of the Nile inundation in September/October then it may be that Pharaoh was going to worship the god of the Nile (Hapi). The flooding of the river was also regarded as a manifestation of the god Osiris.
 2. **v. 15 serpent.** Here the word is *nahash*, the regular word for snake, rather than *tanniyn*, which had been used for the earlier scene in Pharaoh's court (for example, 7:9; cf. last month's Note 7, [Aug. 2002](#), p. 291).
 3. **v. 17 In this thou shalt know.** This picks up Pharaoh's earlier arrogance: “I know not the LORD” (5:2)—he may not know at this point, but he soon will.
 4. **v. 17 the rod that is in Mine hand.** Notice that these words, though spoken by Moses to Pharaoh, are the quoted words of God. Therefore the rod in Moses' hand is in effect a rod in the hand of God Himself.
 5. **v. 19 the waters of Egypt.** A number of words for different types of bodies of water are used in this verse to emphasise the universality of the experience Egypt will have to endure: waters, streams, rivers, ponds, pools of water. This is in addition to the references to the river in verses 17 and 18.

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