

The Ten Plagues of Egypt

Composition and Research  
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## INTRODUCTION

The ten plagues which descended upon Pharaoh and his subjects by the Lord caused distress in both the daily lives and the religion of the Egyptians. Natural and supernatural phenomena which reached the proportions the plagues reached would cause obvious problems in the everyday life of the Egyptians. But for these plagues to also be aimed at their deities would have had devastating effects on their form of worship.

Egypt's religion consisted of many deities, in many forms. Each city had its own god and every one of forty-two provinces its own official deity. Even adding to these the gods on the national level would only begin to bring into focus the vast number of gods the Egyptians possessed. "The gods of Egypt whose names are known to us do not represent all those that have been conceived by the Egyptian imagination."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, to enumerate all the gods affected by the different plagues would be impossible; identifying those which are known would prove to be an enormous task in itself. For this reason discussion will be limited to a few of the major gods in each of the plagues, as well as the discussion of the actual plagues and their effects on the lives of the Egyptians.

### The First Plague

#### The Plague

The account begins with the Lord instructing Moses to meet Pharaoh the next morning at the river (the Nile) and give him a message: let Israel go so they can worship the Lord. That Pharaoh was at the Nile in the morning was probably due to some form of worship of one of the gods connected with the Nile. It would seem that Pharaoh gave no thought to the freeing of his Hebrew slaves since a dialogue between Moses and Pharaoh was not mentioned and the plague of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Wallis Budge, Egyptian Religion (New York: Bell, 1900), p. 110.

water becoming blood occurred. A noted difference of opinion occurs here: The Pulpit Commentary states that “the water had all the physical appearance of blood – the look, taste, smell, texture of blood,”<sup>2</sup> while others, including Charles Carter, believe that what occurred was the annual rising of the Nile to an extended level.<sup>3</sup> The rising of the water level caused the eroding of the red soil of upper Egypt, giving the water a red tint. This, being an annual occurrence, would cause Pharaoh no alarm except that the fish did not usually die. This death may have been due to microscopic organisms infested in the water or the concentration of red soil which inhibited the breathing of the fish. The Hebrew word translated “blood” is the only word in the Old Testament, except one instance, which is translated as “blood.” While this may support the opinion that the river flowed with actual blood, this word may also be translated “that which when shed causes death,”<sup>4</sup> which might not mean literal blood but that the gods of the Nile were dead.

Whatever the actual composition of the “river of blood,” the results were devastating: the fish (and possibly other inhabitants of the river) died, the river stank and the people found the taste disgusting. Not only was this in the area around Pharaoh’s palace: it covered the branches and canals of the Nile, the natural and artificial reservoirs, and even the water stored in the houses. It was indeed “through out all the land of Egypt” (Exod. 7:21).<sup>5</sup>

The magicians mentioned in Exodus 7:22 might be better translated “horoscopists”<sup>6</sup> with no implication of magic. The statement that they had imitated the power shown by Moses may have been reference to the red coloring of the Nile during the floodings of past years, with the magicians taking credit for

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<sup>2</sup> H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, eds., The Pulpit Commentary, I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Charles W. Carter, ed., The Wesleyan Bible Commentary, I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> James Strong, The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Madison: n.p., 1890), n. p.

<sup>5</sup> All scripture cited is from the Authorized King James Version of the Holy Bible.

<sup>6</sup> Strong.

them, or may have been some sleight-of-hand, for had they actually possessed the power they claimed they surely would have reversed the plague. Nevertheless, Pharaoh believed them and took no thought of Moses and his God.

Exodus 7:25 says, “And seven days were fulfilled, after that the Lord had smitten the river.” This could mean either that the duration of the first plague was seven days (which would be an unusually short time for the natural flooding of the Nile) or that seven days elapsed between the beginning of the first plague and the beginning of the second; that is, the Nile could still be in flood stage as the second plague took place.

### The Effects

One may readily see what effect having no water would have on the Egyptians. Because water is one of the necessities of life the Egyptians started digging for it when they found their stored water undrinkable. (They commonly stored water in their houses so the sediment would settle out – for purification.)

Not only was the water supply almost, if not totally, cut off, the food supply was hurt by the killing of the fish. This especially affected the lower class since fish was their main diet.

The plague not only punished the nation which had oppressed God’s chosen people, but also threw contempt on their religion. Two species of sacred fish – the perch and the chromis – were probably among the fish killed in the plague. Selket was one of the protective goddesses of the sources of the Nile. Neith and Hathor were goddesses in charge of guarding certain species of fish in the Nile. But the biggest hit was probably to Hapi, the Nile personified in a god, which was said to be “the giver of life.”<sup>7</sup> Here the Egyptians saw the giver of life as the very symbol of death.

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<sup>7</sup> Spence and Exell, p. 191.

## The Second Plague

### The Plague

With no apparent response by Pharaoh, the Lord told Moses to again go and ask him to let Israel go. God also stated the consequences of refusal of the request: “the river shall bring forth frogs” (Exod. 8:3). The frogs would be so numerous they would be on all the people and throughout all their homes: in their bedrooms, beds and even in the instruments used to prepare their food. Again no response is given from Pharaoh and the plague was immediately performed as the Lord had foretold.

As in the case of the first plague, the magicians claimed to have equal power and might by supposedly accomplishing the same miracle, this (as before) probably by some sleight-of-hand or taking credit for what the Lord had done through Moses. And there is no mention of the magicians’ ability to reverse the plague, which should be of no greater difficulty than the creating of the plague.

The plague continued on until Pharaoh called Moses: the act by which Pharaoh, whether knowingly or not, acknowledged God as the power behind the plagues and Moses as the mediator. Pharaoh promised to let the people go if the frogs were taken away, to which Moses agreed. For an added show of God’s strength, Moses asked Pharaoh when the frogs should be destroyed. Pharaoh requested the next day. Moses prayed to the Lord and the next day all the frogs were dead, and those dead frogs, being heaped together, caused the land to stink. Pharaoh, upon seeing that everything was again bearable, hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

### The Effects

A change in the Nile which would cause fish to die would also cause the frog to leave the river in search of fresh water and protection from the intense heat of the Egyptian sun. A house would provide the latter of the two and maybe some damp places for the frogs. The constant physical contact with the frogs and the constant croaking of thousand of them surely drove the people towards

insanity. And the frog being an Egyptian deity, the people were not allowed to kill them. So the Egyptians were in constant torture until the Lord killed them and even then were constantly reminded of the past plague by the stench that filled the land from the heaps of dead frogs. Some suggest that the frogs died from bacteria picked up from the dying fish.<sup>8</sup>

Frogs themselves were worshipped in Egypt and were considered to be the “sacred emblem of creative power.”<sup>9</sup> And here those which held creative power were lying dead in heaps. There were also many deities represented by the frog, the greatest of which was probably Heket – the goddess of childbirth.

### The Third Plague

#### The Plague

Unlike the two former plagues, the plague was preceded by no warning to Pharaoh. Aaron was instructed to stretch his rod over the dust of the land, at which time the dust became lice. Pharaoh’s magicians tried to imitate this supernatural act but failed. They told Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God” (Exod. 8:19), or “of a god,” probably with no intention of acknowledging the one supreme God.<sup>10</sup> This excuse would provide a reason for their not being able to copy the great work of the Lord and also an opportunity to end the contest they had begun when they imitated Aarons turning his rod into a serpent. Even with the magicians’ admittance to these being a supernatural being creating all these sings and wonder, Pharaoh’s heart was again hardened.

#### The Effects

The word translated “lice” in the King James Version of the Bible has also been translated “gnats,” “sand flies,” “fleas,” and “mosquitoes.” The original word gives a sense of fastening, as a stinger<sup>11</sup> which would include any type of

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<sup>8</sup> Carter, p. 195.

<sup>9</sup> Spence and Exell, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> Spence and Exell, p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> Strong.

biting insect. The Egyptians were not only plagued by the bite of sting but also by the uncleanness the lice caused: “The Egyptians abhorred lice . . . and washed their clothes and bodies regularly . . . for cleanliness’ sake.”<sup>12</sup>

Not many deities were connected with this plague. One of them was Anhur, which was a “popular god with the ordinary people, . . . the ‘Savior’ and the ‘Good Warrior’ who gave protection against enemies, both human and animal.”<sup>13</sup> The uncleanness may also have religious significance in that the Egyptians were required to be extremely clean when worshiping their gods.

### The Fourth Plague

#### The Plague

In this plague, as in the first, God tells Moses to go meet Pharaoh at the water and to tell him to let His people go or else face a fourth plague – swarms of flies everywhere, covering everything. A new feature was shown in this plague: the separation of Egyptians and Israelites. The Lord said the plague would only be upon the Egyptians and that His people would not be affected by it. Another difference was the setting of a definite time the plague would begin, whereas the previous times God had set no time for their commencement.

With Pharaoh making no recorded attempt to be reconciled with God, the wrath of the Almighty was poured out in the form of the promised “swarms;” the words “of flies” are not in the original text. While in actuality these may have been flies, some believe they were “a multitude of beetles.”<sup>14</sup> This would have been, in all probability, the scarab, a beetle common to the Egyptian area.

When Pharaoh found himself in another of the great signs of God’s anger, he once more called for Moses. For the first time Pharaoh offered a compromise – that the Israelites sacrifice to God in Egypt – which was immediately refused. Pharaoh then said, “I will let you go, . . . only ye shall not go far away: entreat for

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<sup>12</sup> Charles F. Aling, Egypt and Bible History from Earliest Times to 1000 B.C. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 42, citing Herodotus, Histories 2. 35-36.

<sup>13</sup> Veronica Ions, Egyptian Mythology (Italy: Hamlyn, 1965), p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Spence and Exell, p. 192.

me” (Exod. 8:28). So Moses prayed and the Lord removed all the flies, and being freed from the burden, Pharaoh hardened his heart.

### The Effects

As stated in the last plague the Egyptians were very mindful of cleanliness, which would have been totally impossible if the swarms were of flies, and beetles would have probably caused the same problems. If indeed the scarab beetle was the means of the plague, the Egyptian religious system suffered another blow because these Beetles were considered scared and no one was allowed to kill them. Also included in that blow was one of the individual gods – a deity dealing with rebirth into eternal life – whose symbol was the beetle.

## The Fifth Plague

### The Plague

In the fifth plague the Lord strikes the livestock of the unyielding Pharaoh and his servants, that stroke being in the form of a “great murrain”: a deadly pestilence. This may have been from anthrax which has killed the frogs that had had been left in heaps in the field.<sup>15</sup> Only the livestock that were in the field (Exod. 9:3) were affected, which can be seen in the fact that cattle suffered under the plague of hail, which is yet to come.

As in the fourth plague, and every plague hereafter, a difference was made between the Israelites and the Egyptians and between their properties. This sign of God’s vengeance was also set at a predicted time in the future. Pharaoh’s heart was again hardened.

### The Effects

This is the first plague to mention actual destruction of property, and that destruction was upon the economic and social standards of Egypt. Cattle were a symbol of social wealth, horses were of great military value, asses served as beasts of burden. And as in other plagues, the religious world was affected in that Egypt

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<sup>15</sup> Carter, p. 197.

had many gods which were represented by cows and bulls. The list included Apis (the Nile god), Mont (the “Bull of the Might Arms”), Buchis (the “Bull of the sky”), Hathor, and Mnevis. So a powerful attack was made upon Egyptian worship.

### The Sixth Plague

#### The Plague

This plague was similar to the third in that it was unannounced to Pharaoh. Moses, upon the commandment of the Lord, sprinkled ashes from the furnace toward heaven, in the sight of Pharaoh. This dust became ulcerous sores on the people of Egypt. The magicians had to leave Moses’ presence, maybe due to the pain of the sores, but probably because the priests (being a priest was a requirement of the magician) were required to be spotlessly clean to serve in their position: “The priests were most scrupulously clean . . . and they bathed four times during the twenty-four hours.”<sup>16</sup>

In this plague is found that God, instead of Pharaoh, hardens Pharaoh’s heart. In the forthcoming plagues the same is true.

#### The Effects

There were obviously pain and discomfort for the Egyptians caused by this plague, but the religious realm did not remain untouched. Not only was there gross uncleanness, but the name of the god Bes was marred. Bes was “primarily a god of good humor and merry making.”<sup>17</sup> This would also apply to other plagues.

### The Seventh Plague

#### The Plague

Hail was the seventh plague God sent on Egypt. Moses was sent to Pharaoh to warn of the oncoming destruction, and while Pharaoh himself took no

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<sup>16</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, The Dwellers on the Nile (n.p.: Religious Tract, 1899), p. 145.

<sup>17</sup> Ions, p. 111.

precautions, some of the people heeded the advice of Moses and brought in their servants and livestock. At the appointed time the hail descended, accompanied by thunder and lightning.

The hail did extensive damage to the land of Egypt. It killed men and beasts: everything left in the field was lost. The trees were destroyed, along with the barley and flax, which were ready to be harvested.

Pharaoh sent for Moses and asked him to pray for the removal of the plague, at which time he would let the people go. Moses agreed to stopping the plague but said that Pharaoh would again fail to keep his word. The plague was removed and Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

### The Effects

The plague of hail doubtlessly had a sobering effect on the people: it was the first plague to bring death to a human. This probably caused even Pharaoh to consider the situation a little more seriously.

The destruction of the flax had some religious significance: the priests were only allowed to wear clothes of linen, a product of flax. The deities affected included Ernut (the harvest goddess), Sekhet (the meadow goddess), Ged (the vegetation god) and most of all Min, whose symbol was a thunderbolt, a part of the plague itself.

## The Eighth Plague

### The Plague

Moses was sent once more to tell Pharaoh of the approaching plague – locusts. But Pharaoh, even after his servants pleaded with him, refused to give in to the demands of the Lord. He did offer another compromise, which was refused. All that day and night an east wind blew and the next day the locusts came.

The locust ate everything that was left by the previous plagues, including the wheat and rye. There was not a green plant, leaf, or stem of any kind left by the locusts.

Pharaoh called Moses as in the times before to plead for deliverance from the plague. And after Moses prayed and the Lord drove the locusts away by a west wind and cast them into the Red Sea, He hardened Pharaoh's heart.

### The Effects

The land of Egypt was utterly desolate by this time, and the Egyptian worship had suffered equally. In this plague one semi-major god – Min – and one major god – Osiris – were challenged and beaten. Min was associated with the growth and ripening of grain. Osiris, a god mainly concerned with the after-life, is pictured sometimes with wheat growing out of his body.<sup>18</sup> By destruction of the wheat he who was represented by it was destroyed.

### The Ninth Plague

#### The Effects

The ninth plague, as in both the first and sixth, came without warning to Pharaoh or his people. It was a plague of thick darkness – so thick that it could be felt. Less darkness could have been caused by sand storms from the Sahara Desert, which are common in the Egypt area, but not to the extent that there is absolute darkness. If the darkness was actually due to such a phenomenon it would be only by the power of God for it to reach such intensity.

Moses was summoned by Pharaoh one last time and offered another compromise. When Moses rejected it Pharaoh was wroth and threatened Moses with death if he ever saw Moses' face again. Moses delivered the warning of the tenth and final plague then left (this will be discussed in the next plague).

#### The Effects

Exodus 10:23 states that none rose "from his place for three days." The word translated "place" carries the idea of depression, which would rightly describe anyone having gone through the nine plagues. No doubt that people considered the situation hopeless.

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<sup>18</sup> Budge, Egyptian Religion, p. 31.

The feeling of depression surely was felt in Egypt's worship. Besides the less major and the minor gods of Hathor, Horus, and Khones (the moon god) – all of which dealt in some way with the sky – there was the god of all Egyptian gods, Ra, the great sun god, who had been defeated by Jehovah Himself. Ra was considered to be “the Father of the [g]ods”<sup>19</sup> and “one of the greatest of the Egyptian deities.”<sup>20</sup> Egypt's main god had suffered a deadly blow when God Almighty cast a veil over the sun for three days.

### The Tenth Plague

#### The Plague

Before leaving Pharaoh's presence during the ninth plague, Moses delivered the announcement of the last plague, the one which would change Pharaoh's heart. The death of the first born was predicted upon all, from Pharaoh to his lowest servant and even the beasts. Again God “put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel” (Exod. 11:7). Then for the last time God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

“[A]t midnight the Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 12:29). Notice may be given that the Lord, not a death angel, is mentioned as the one who did the killing. As foretold, all the first born were found dead, from the lowest beast to the house of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh sent a message to Moses to take the Israelites and all they possessed and leave Egypt. And, almost as a desperate plea for help, he asked Moses to bless him.

#### The Effects

The effects of this plague were immediate: great grief throughout the land. Now fully assured that Moses and his God were behind all the plagues, the Egyptians begged the Israelites to go and were even willing to give them the most

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Patrick, All Color Book of Egyptian Mythology (New York: Crescent, 1972), p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Carter, p. 201.

precious possessions of Egypt. The Egyptians hastened them on out of fear for their own lives.

“The final plague . . . conquered Meskhemit, the goddess of birth, and Hathor, her companion, both of whom were supposed to watch over the firstborn.”<sup>21</sup> And greatest of all was the hit inflicted on the Egyptians’ living god call Pharaoh. He was considered to be a god on earth and the head mediator between the gods and men. The first born son of Pharaoh, a pharaoh himself, was conquered by the God of Moses and the Israelites.

### CONCLUSION

It is readily visible that much annoyance, affliction and even death were sent upon the Egyptians, to proportions never seen before, by Jehovah Himself. With the completion of the ten plagues the land of Egypt was almost beyond repair and the spirits of its inhabitants broken. Undoubtedly many years and much work were required to bring Egypt back to any resemblance of her previous glory.

In like manner the religious system was attacked. All manner of gods were challenged by the powers of God Almighty and failed miserably. Yet the Egyptians, who realize the power which Moses stood for was far beyond that of their deities, continued to worship these defeated gods. The only conclusion seen by this writer is that the Egyptians were affected both domestically and religiously by the plagues, the former causing a release of the Israelites and the latter causing no real change at all.

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<sup>21</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), p. 56.

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