

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
WEEK 19: EXODUS 6-11 – THE PLAGUES
OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS 5-11

I. The Problems – Exodus 5

- A. Pharaoh insults the God of Israel (Exodus 5:1-3)
- B. Pharaoh increases the burdens of Israel/gather your own straw to make bricks (Exodus 5:4-14)
- C. The people get angry with Moses and Aaron and Moses complains to God (Exodus 5:15-23)

II. The Promise – Exodus 6

- A. God will deliver them from Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land (Exodus 6:1-13)
- B. The Families of Reuben, Simeon and Levi (the ancestor of Moses and Aaron) (Exodus 6:14-30)

III. The Preliminaries – Exodus 7:1-13

- A. Aaron appointed by God to serve as a prophet and spokesman for Moses (Exodus 7:1-2)
- B. God will soon pour out divine wrath on Egypt (Exodus 7:3-7)
- C. Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh again (Exodus 7:8-13)

IV. The Plagues – Exodus 7:14-11:10

- A. **BLOOD** – Water of the Nile turned to Blood (Exodus 7:14-25)
- B. **FROGS** – Frogs cover every square foot of the land (Exodus 8:1-15)
- C. **GNATS** – Aaron strikes the dust and gnats suddenly infest the nation (Exodus 8:16-19)
- D. **FLIES** – Egypt is filled with great swarms of flies, but none appear in the land of Goshen (Exodus 8:20-32)
- E. **PLAGUE ON LIVESTOCK** – All Egyptian livestock suddenly become sick and begin to die (Exodus 9:1-7)
- F. **BOILS** – After Moses tosses soot into the air, festering boils break out on people and animals (Exodus 9:8-12)
- G. **HAIL** – (Exodus 9:13-35)
- H. **LOCUSTS** – A strong east wind blows in the worst locust plague in Egyptian history (Exodus 10:1-20)
- I. **DARKNESS** – The Lord sends a deep, terrifying darkness over all of Egypt for three days (Exodus 10:21-29)
- J. **DEATH OF FIRSTBORN SONS** – This plague will result in Israel's freedom (Exodus 11:1-10)

EXODUS 6:1-12

God explains God's purpose in permitting Pharaoh to resist and commits God's self to bring God's people to the land promised Abraham so long ago. But the discouraged Israelites are too crushed to hope. Verse 3 is problematic because in it God says that God did not make God's self known to the Patriarchs by the name YHWH. But as we know, this name was used in the book of Genesis. Source theory explains this problem by indicating that Exodus 3:14-15 was from the "E" source and this verse is from the "P" source.

EXODUS 6:13-27 – THE GENEALOGY

What is this doing here? Why disrupt the flow of the narrative? Verses 10-12 and 28-30 help answer these questions. Both times, God gives Moses the order to go to Pharaoh and both times Moses reminds God that he has a speaking problem. This problem frames the genealogy. It is purposeful. And its purpose is to establish the pedigree of Moses and Aaron because both are of the tribe of Levi.

But why is that important and why is it important to highlight this right here and right now? This is no ordinary genealogy. It begins by mentioning the two oldest sons of Jacob: Reuben and Simeon. This is normal. And then Levi is the third son of Jacob and Leah. And the rest of the genealogy traces Levi's descendants exclusively, to the fifth generation, with the primary focus being not Moses, but Aaron. Levi to Kohath to Amram to Aaron (and Moses) to Eleazar to Phinehas. The clear focus of the genealogy is the Levitical lineage from Levi to Phinehas, with Aaron standing in the midway position.

This genealogy should not be understood literally, but theologically. Clearly Kohath (who according to Genesis 46:11 made the initial journey into Egypt) was not the great uncle of Moses because Moses was 80 at the time of the Exodus and Israel stayed in Egypt for 400 years. It is meant to show that God's purposes to redeem Israel reach backwards and forwards (since Phinehas is the grandson of Aaron). In Numbers 25:1-17, Phinehas turns God's anger away from the Israelites by killing an Israelite and his Midianite wife. He was also successful in helping them avoid war when the eastern tribes built an altar at Gilead (in Joshua 22:1-34).

But why is there so much focus on the line of Aaron and not the line of Moses? Perhaps the author needs to establish Aaron's pedigree to show that he is a worthy partner for Moses.

THE TEN PLAGUES

The 10 plagues of Egypt were acts of divine justice by God against the oppressors of God's people. They demonstrated the power of the one true God and exposed the gods that the Egyptians worshiped as false. Each plague corresponded to particular Egyptian gods and served to prove—both to the Egyptians and the Israelites—who the true Sovereign Ruler was.

HARDENING OF PHARAOH'S HEART

As noted in an earlier handout, the issue of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a prominent feature in the plague narrative. In Plagues 1, 3, 5, and 7, "Pharaoh's heart was/became hard." In Plagues 2 and 4 "Pharaoh hardened his heart." In plagues 6, 8, and 9, it is God who hardens Pharaoh's heart.

THE FIRST PLAGUE – WATER TURNED TO BLOOD – EXODUS 7:14-25

Plague: The water of the Nile river was turned to blood.

Egyptian God(s): Hapi (god of the annual flooding of the Nile), Khnum (ram-headed god of the source of the Nile; potter God of creation) and Osiris (god of life, death, and afterlife; Nile was his bloodstream)

Pharaoh's Response: Heart remained hardened and he would not listen to them.

Effect: It killed all the fish and made the water unusable, devastating the economy. Duplicated by the Egyptians.

Why was this the first plague? Think about the parallelism. Israel's deliverance begins and ends with a mighty act of God relating to water. The turning of the Nile into blood and the story of Pharaoh's army being swallowed up by the Red Sea serve as a narrative frame for the story of deliverance.

It is also fitting since in Exodus, chapter 1, Pharaoh tried to exterminate the Israelite threat by casting the Hebrew children into the Nile. Now God has turned the Nile against the Egyptians. Since the Nile was the life-giving source of the Egyptian empire, an attack on the Nile was nothing less than an attack on Egypt itself. And so this first plague looks both forward (to the fate of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea) and backwards (to the attempt by Pharaoh to exterminate the Israelites).

THE SECOND PLAGUE – FROGS – EXODUS 8:1-15

Plague: Frogs

Egyptian God(s): Heqet (the frog goddess of fertility and ender to chaos; became associated with the final stages of childbirth, and midwives were sometimes called the "Servants of Heqet").

Pharaoh's Response: Heart hardened and would not listen to them.

Effect: Frogs invaded all the homes and later died. The Egyptians believed frogs to be sacred. A plague of frogs can be understood as an attack on the Egyptian fertility goddess. The frogs come out of the Nile and so the Nile is the source of the first two plagues; which is fitting since Pharaoh tried to use the Nile against the Israelites. This plague is duplicated by the Egyptians, but the question is why. Why add to the misery? But that's not the point. Once the magicians are able to do it, Pharaoh asks Moses to make the plague stop. Apparently, only God can make them stop. And so we begin to see in this story that the cessation of plagues is just as important a sign as the plagues themselves. To highlight the extent of God's power, Moses gives Pharaoh a choice of when the plague will stop. One interesting thing to note in this plague story, is that in verse 9 Moses speaks directly to Pharaoh, not Aaron. It's also interesting that as the plague stories continue, Aaron's role diminishes.

THE THIRD PLAGUE – GNATS – EXODUS 8:16-19

Plague: Gnats

Egyptian God(s): Set (god of the desert)

Set is a god of the desert, storms, disorder, violence, and foreigners. He was lord of the red (desert) land. He is portrayed as an usurper who killed and mutilated his own brother Osiris. He is usually depicted as a jackyl or fox.

Pharaoh's Response: Heart hardened, he would not listen to them.

Effect: The dust of the desert turned to gnats and swarmed over everything. Some suggest that it was lice rather than gnats. No matter. This is the first plague that the Egyptian sorcerers couldn't duplicate. The magicians told Pharaoh that

this plague comes from the “finger of God”. The Hebrew for that phrase is ambiguous. It might just mean “this is the finger of a god.” Also of note: there’s no warning to Pharaoh for this one.

THE PATTERN IS ESTABLISHED – Go to Pharaoh in the morning. Go to Pharaoh. Do this without warning.

If you pay attention to the pattern created by the plagues, you’ll notice that they come in series of three and that each series follows the same pattern. With each plague at the start of a series, Moses is told to go to Pharaoh early in the morning and demand that Pharaoh let the people go. With the second in each series, Moses is told to go to Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh let the people go. But with the third in each series, Moses is just told to perform the action that will bring on the plague.

THE FOURTH PLAGUE – FLIES – EXODUS 8:20-32

Plague: Flies

Egyptian God(s): Uatchit (the fly goddess); incidentally, some connect this plague to Beelzebub (“lord of the flies”), a Ugaritic deity.

Pharaoh’s Response: Go, sacrifice to your God within the land. Not here? Okay, then not far away. Pray for me. After it stops, “you can’t go”.

Effect: Flies swarmed the Egyptians—the first plague that didn’t also affect the Israelites. God now makes a separation between the Egyptians and Israelites.

Again, this plague is the first plague in the second series of plagues and resembles the first plague in that Moses goes out to Pharaoh early in the morning and confronts Pharaoh as he is going out of the water (see Exodus 7:15; 8:20). No staff is used in this plague (it won’t appear again until plague 7; when it will be Moses’ staff and not Aaron’s). As noted above, this is also the first plague that doesn’t affect the Israelites. Also, this is the first time a plague brings destruction to the land. This is another plague in which Moses prays for it to stop.

THE FIFTH PLAGUE – LIVESTOCK DISEASED – EXODUS 9:1-7

Plague: Diseased livestock

Egyptian God(s): Hathor and Apis (cattle gods)

Hathor is commonly depicted as a cow goddess with horns within which is set a sun disk.

In Egyptian mythology, Apis (or Hapis) was a live sacred bull worshipped in the Memphis region.

Pharaoh’s Response: Sends investigators to check on Israelites’ livestock.

Effect: The Egyptian cattle died, devastating the economy further.

Again, no staff is used in this plague. And this plague being the second in the second series, Moses is told to “go to Pharaoh and speak to him.” There is no opportunity for Pharaoh to repent. Moses makes the declaration and says that it will happen the next day, and it does. Whereas the “finger of god” brought about the last plague, this one is brought about by the “hand” of the Lord. The “hand” of God is used frequently in Exodus (for example, 3:19; 6:1; 13:3) and is associated with mighty acts of judgment. The declaration that all the animals of the Egyptians had died was probably not meant to be taken literally but is most likely hyperbole since animals will be mentioned later on (see Exodus 9:9, 19). It’s also interesting to note that Pharaoh is said to have sent people to check on the livestock of the Israelites.

THE SIXTH PLAGUE – BOILS – EXODUS 9:8-12

Plague: Boils

Egyptian God(s): Sekhmet (goddess of epidemics), Sunu and Isis (gods over health and disease)

Pharaoh’s Response: He would not listen.

Effect: Boils covered the bodies of the Egyptians and kept the sorcerers away from the royal court.

This is the first plague in which the text says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. Of course, this was forecast in Exodus 4:21 and it is understood that God was always going to harden Pharaoh’s heart with these plagues. This is also the first plague that threatened the lives of the Egyptians; one that affects their health directly. There’s a bit of irony in the source of the plague. Soot from a kiln is tossed in the air; soot that was probably used for the baking of the bricks the Israelites were making as slaves of Pharaoh. The plague only affects the Egyptians and is a polemic against their gods. The magicians not only can’t stop the plague, but they can’t even save themselves.

THE SEVENTH PLAGUE – HAIL – EXODUS 9:13-35

Plague: Hail

Egyptian God(s): Nut (the sky goddess), Osiris (the crop fertility god; god of the dead), and Set (the storm god)

Pharaoh's Response: I have sinned. Please stop it. Great. But you still can't go.

Effect: Hail and fire ruined the Egyptians' land.

This plague begins the third series of plagues and begins with an early morning confrontation. In this plague, the heavens unleash their fury against Egypt. And it is quickly declared that God could have already wiped Egypt off the map. Verse 26 says that the only place it did not hail was the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were. Hail is often associated with an act of judgment on God's part (see Joshua 10:11; Psalm 18:12; Isaiah 28:2, 27; 30:30; Ezekiel 13:11-13; 38:22). It's interesting that Pharaoh is offered some protection here. He is told that he should order his people to bring themselves and their livestock inside (the same livestock that should have died during the 5th plague). Why is this the case? Is it part of God's mercy? Or is it a test of Pharaoh's will? When the Hail arrives, it not only affects animals and people, it affects everything. What's also interesting is that Pharaoh finally admits to having sinned against God; though that is short-lived.

THE EIGHTH PLAGUE – LOCUSTS – EXODUS 10:1-20

Plague: Locusts

Egyptian God(s): Nut (the sky goddess), Osiris (the crop fertility god; god of the dead), and Set (the storm god)

Pharaoh's Response: Your men may go but they go alone.

Effect: The locusts devoured the Egyptian crops, preventing a harvest for that year.

It's interesting that in the opening lines of this plague we are told that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart. This plague is similar to the earlier plague of hail in that it causes devastation to people, plants, and animals. And it represents a form of judgment that is found elsewhere in scripture (see Joel 1-2). The locusts come on the land by an east wind (which is also the wind that causes the Red Sea to part). And it's interesting that the locusts die in the Red Sea which is where Pharaoh's army will drown (see Exodus 14:28; which includes the phrase "not one survived"). Another interesting point is that Moses and Aaron's question in verse 3 ("How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go.") is echoed by Pharaoh's officials in verse 7 who ask "How long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Let the people go."

THE NINTH PLAGUE – DARKNESS – EXODUS 10:21-29

Plague: Darkness

Egyptian God(s): Re (god of the sun; also symbolic of Pharaoh himself) Pharaoh is considered to be a son of Re.

Pharaoh's Response: Y'all may go but you can't bring your flocks with you. Moses says no. Pharaoh changes his mind. Says "Don't come back again or you'll die."

Effect: Darkness covered Egypt for three days, but the Israelite homes still had light.

This is the third plague of the third series of plagues and Moses is instructed to perform it without interacting with Pharaoh according to the pattern.

THE TENTH PLAGUE – DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN – EXODUS 11:1-10 (EXODUS 12:29-32)

Plague: Death of the Egyptian firstborn sons

Egyptian God(s): Isis (the protector of children); Osiris (god of the dead)

Pharaoh's Response: Your men may go but they go alone.

Egyptian's Response: They looked with favor on the Israelites and Moses was an important person to Pharaoh's officials.

Effect: The angel of God killed the firstborn sons of the Egyptians but passed over the homes of the Israelites. This plague was a judgment on all of Egypt's gods, including Pharaoh himself. In Exodus 1, Pharaoh had killed the sons of Israel. Now the Lord kills the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. Pharaoh will now let Israel go.

This announcement should be read in light of Exodus 4:21-23 where God had previously told Moses what would ultimately happen to Egypt. It's odd that Moses is talking to Pharaoh, because both Pharaoh and Moses had declared that they never wanted to see each other again. But, perhaps this is just a continuation of the conversation that takes place in 10:24-29. It's as if, while leaving, Moses turns to Pharaoh and says, "O yeah, one more thing..." Then Moses leaves and they will only meet again once Pharaoh agrees to let them go (see Exodus 12:31-32).

It's also interesting that "in hot anger" Moses left Pharaoh. After this, we have a summary and then the institution of the first Passover. It's not until we get towards the end of Exodus chapter 12 that the tenth plague actually takes place and the people leave.