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The 10 plagues

Egyptology has illuminated our understanding of the Bible's description of the plagues that struck Egypt and led to the Israelites' departure from that land.

The Egyptians were religious people. They had gods for everything and scrupulously tried to please them. They had 39 principal gods, many of them depicted in Egyptian art with animal bodies or heads. In Egyptian temples, priests cared for many types of sacred animals that represented deities.

In one respect the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt was a confrontation between the true God, Yahweh, and the false gods of that land. It would remove any doubt in the Israelites' minds as to who was the true God and which was the true religion. God had in mind not only to take His people from Egypt, but to discourage worship of the supposedly powerful Egyptian gods. He made this clear when He told Moses: "For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord" (Exodus 12:12).

Later, in Numbers 33:4, we read that "on their gods the Lord had executed judgments." God directed each of the 10 plagues against Egyptian gods that ostensibly held sway over an aspect of nature. The plagues represented, collectively, a dramatic demonstration to Israelite and Egyptian alike that the gods were false; they were powerless to come to the aid of anyone who implored them.

An ancient Egyptian calendar reveals numerous holidays dedicated to the gods—so many that it appears that not many working days remained in the year. When Moses told Pharaoh that Israel would leave for several days to celebrate a feast to God, Pharaoh was indignant: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go . . . Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people from their work? Get back to your labor" (Exodus 5:2, 4).

Pharaoh apparently thought that the Israelites enjoyed plenty of free time, so he refused the petition. Observing Pharaoh's recalcitrance, God acted.

Plagues against the deities

The first plague was aimed at the most venerable and valuable resource of Egyptian civilization, the powerful Nile River, along with the gods the Egyptians associated with it. Egypt's food supply depended on the flooding of the Nile, as well as its annual deposits of silt to replenish the fertility of the soil. Sometimes, as in Joseph's day, failure of the Nile to overflow its banks would result in a famine. So the Egyptians prayed

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regularly to their gods for abundant water. The first plague made the water undrinkable and rancid. The fish, a valuable source of food, perished.

The Egyptians counted on the Nile goddess Hapi and the powerful Osiris to protect the Nile. Nothing resulted from the clamor and prayers of the Egyptians that their gods would purify the Nile. Only when Moses and Aaron prayed to the true God were the waters refreshed. Yet Pharaoh remained proud. He believed a host of powerful gods were waiting to do his bidding; indeed Pharaoh himself was considered a god by most Egyptians.

The second plague targeted one of the creatures the Egyptians associated with the Nile. Egyptians worshiped the frog in the form of Heqt, whose statue bore the head of a frog. This god was symbolic of good crops and blessings in the afterlife. Egyptians noticed that, when the Nile reached a certain level and overflowed, frogs abounded. Their presence was an omen of bountiful crops and control of the insect population. A low Nile with few frogs meant a lack of silt, poor crops and many insects.

Heqt, god of the frogs, supposedly controlled the frog population. When the second plague produced too many frogs, it appeared to the Egyptians that the god who governed them had lost control. No amount of prayers and incense altered the situation. Only when the true God intervened did the frogs die and the crisis end.

The third and fourth plagues featured another favorite god of the Egyptians, Kheper, the scarab deity represented by beetles and other insects. The image of the scarab god appeared frequently on amulets. "The cult to flies, and especially of the beetles, was an important part of the ancient Egyptian religion" (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, Exegetical Commentary of the Bible, Vol. 1, p. 67). "Various types of beetles were venerated in Egypt; among them the dung beetle [which] became the emblem of resurrection and continual existence . . ." (The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 4, p. 258).

When a swarm of lice or gnats (or possibly mosquitoes) and horseflies stung the populace, the court magicians asked the insect god to control them, but to no avail. Only when Pharaoh pleaded with Moses to ask the God of Israel to remove the pests did the plague abate.

Sacred bull

The next plague affected cattle, which the Egyptians considered to be under the control of Apis, the bull god, and Hathor, the cowlike mother goddess. The bull was considered sacred. When the bull in a temple died, it was mummified and buried with great pomp. The fifth plague struck at this mode of worship. "So the Lord did this thing on the next

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day, and all the livestock of Egypt died; but of the livestock of the children of Israel, not one of them died" (Exodus 9:6). No amount of pagan prayer could alter the outcome.

Next came a plague of boils, which the Egyptians thought they could cure by resorting to their god of medicine, Imhotep, a legendary Egyptian physician who came to be worshiped. They also revered Thoth, the god of magic and healing. But again in this case the boils did not go away. Even worse, the court magicians who besought these entities were themselves covered with the pestilence: "And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians" (verse 11).

Again, Pharaoh and other Egyptians pleaded with Moses that God would take away the problem. God's power to remove this plague served as a witness not only to the Egyptians and the Israelites, but to the rest of the world. God told Pharaoh: "But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth" (verse 16). This witness remains with us today through the Bible account.

The seventh and eighth plagues struck Egypt's crops. First, a horrible hailstorm hit the harvest, then a swarm of locusts completed the destruction. The crops were supposed to be guarded by Seth, the harvest god, and it was up to Nut, the sky goddess, to prevent weather disasters. Yet the pleas of the Egyptians fell on deaf ears. Pharaoh was running out of gods to protect his people.

God strikes the mightiest

The final two plagues were directed at the two mightiest gods of the Egyptians, Ra the chief god, represented by the sun, and Pharaoh himself.

Egyptians believed Ra to be the source of life, bringing light and heat to the earth. The ninth plague brought three days of no sunlight. The darkness was so "thick," says Scripture, that even lamps could not dispel the blackness. "So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another; nor did anyone rise from his place for three days. But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings" (Exodus 10:22-23).

In spite of the prayers and supplications the Egyptians must have offered up to Ra, the sun god did nothing.

The final god in dire need of humbling was Pharaoh himself, who supposedly descended from the god Ra. Pharaoh's patron gods were Osiris, the judge of the dead, and Horus,

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the god of light. Egyptian worship of the Pharaohs found expression in the construction for their leaders of great pyramids as tombs. The 10th plague struck even the offspring of the Egyptians' man-god.

Pharaoh himself was powerless to stop the death of his firstborn son, who was next in line to sit worthy of Egyptians' worship. "And it came to pass at midnight that the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock" (Exodus 12:29). With his gods impotent and humiliated, mighty Pharaoh finally relented, and the Exodus of the children of Israel began.

The Ten Plagues on Egypt - What were they?

God redeemed the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt with an outstretched arm and with mighty wonders. These came in the form of plagues which He poured out upon the land of Egypt. God is merciful, but He is also HOLY. The plagues were more than just a demonstration of God's power, each one was a judgement upon the idolatrous worship of a pagan Egyptian deity.

1. The first plague was blood (dahm) - Exodus 7.14-24. This was an attack on Hapi, the father of the gods, who was "god" of the Nile, the one who brings water to all Egypt for life. He was responsible for watering the meadows and bringing the dew. But most importantly he brought fertile inundation, the rising of the Nile. As a fertility god, he is associated with Osiris.

The Nile was considered the link from this life to the next. The Nile was considered the blood of Osiris. The priests of Egypt held blood in abhorrence, yet they cruelly sported with blood of the captive Israelites whose children they caused to be cast into the Nile. The Egyptians worshipped the river, but when its waters turned to blood it must have excited their loathing and detestation, while the calamity would cover them with confusion and shame of their great god Hapi being defamed. Other deities connected with the Nile are Amon, and Khnum who was the guardian of the Nile.

2. The second plague was frogs (tz'fahr'day-a) - Exodus 8.1-15. This was an attack on Heka (Heqt) the toad goddess, wife of Knepfh (Khnum) who was "goddess" of the land. Also, Heka was the goddess of the resurrection and procreative power. Frogs were consecrated to the Osiris and were the symbol of inspiration. Frogs and

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toads were very sacred to the Egyptians. If someone killed a frog, even unintentionally, the person was punishable by death.

3. The third plague was gnats (kinnim) - Exodus 8.16-19. This was an attack on Geb, “the great cackler,” who was “god” of the earth or vegetation. He was the father of Osiris and husband of Nut.

4. The fourth plague was flies (arov) - Exodus 8.20-32. This was an attack on Khephi, scarab, who was the “god” of insects. The plague of beetle, a scarab, was an emblem of Re (Ra), the sun god.

5. The fifth plague was livestock (dever) - Exodus 9.1-7. This was an attack on Apis, who was the bull “god.” His counterpart was Hathor, the cow goddess. Their place of worship was at On (Heliopolis). The Egyptians held many beasts in idolatrous veneration. The lion, wolf, dog, cat, ape, and goat were very sacred to them; but especially the ox, heifer, and ram (Khnun). The soul of their god Osiris was believed to reside in the body of the bull, Apis. Mnevis, the bull god, was symbol of fertility.

6. The sixth plague was boils (sh’chir) - Exodus 9.8-12. This was an attack on Thoth (Imhotep), who the “god” of medicine and intelligence/wisdom. The Egyptians had several medical deities, to whom, on special occasions, they sacrificed humans. They were burnt alive on a high altar, and their ashes were cast into the air, that with every scattered ash a blessing might descend upon the people. Mosheh took ashes from the furnace and cast them into the air. The ashes were scattered by the wind descending upon all the priests, people, and beasts as boils, thus shaming the god Thoth.

7. The seventh plague was hail (barad) - Exodus 9.13-35. This was an attack on Nut, who was the sky “goddess,” for this was harvest time, the time of plenty. Like her husband Geb, Yahweh attacked and destroyed the crops. She was the mother of Osiris. Also, this was an attack on Isis, goddess of life, and Seth, protector of crops.

8. The eighth plague was locust (arbeh) - Exodus 10.1-20. This was an attack on Anubis, who was the “god” of the fields, especially cemeteries. This plague finishes up the work that was done by the hail. They devoured every herb of the land and fruit of the trees. Also, this plague was an attack on Isis, protector of against locust, and Seth, protector of crops.

9. The ninth plague was darkness (choshekh) - Exodus 10.21-29. This was an attack on Ra or Amon-Re, the sun “god.” Darkness was considered a creation of Seth, evil principle destroyer of Osiris. It seemed Re (Ra), the sun god, was dead; and Seth

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had killed him. This plague was so terrible that it a darkness that could be felt! At the same time that the Egyptians had darkness, the Israelites had light. He is believed to be the physical father of all Pharaohs. Pharaoh was the king of all gods.

10. The tenth plague was death of the first-born (makkat b'khorot) - Exodus 11,12. This was an attack on Pharaoh, who was the "god-king." Pharaoh was considered a god, and his first-born son, who would succeed him on the throne. In fact, first-born people and animals were often worshipped. Pharaoh was considered an incarnation of Ra, the sun god, and Osiris, the giver of life. Because Pharaoh's son was consider a god, a god of Egypt actually died.

This plague Yahweh used to humble Egypt for the cruel ways that they had treated His people. Egypt had enslaved Egypt and had murdered their male children, but Yahweh, Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, the One who has always existed, strikes back with an awful vengeance. His righteous anger was made known upon ever house that was not covered with the blood. When Yahweh saw the blood, he passed over.

In each of these plagues, Yahweh preserved His people. His scepter is both a staff of deliverance and a rod of correction. Only those who obeyed God by placing the blood upon the door were spared. Any Israelite who chose not to follow God's commands came under a curse of death, and any truly repentant Egyptian who would join themselves to the people of God would be spared.

Each one of us needs to pray to Yahweh that He expose the false gods in our lives. We must repent and come to our loving Heavenly Father for mercy and forgiveness. We need to recognize the atonement He has graciously provided and apply the sacrificial blood of Messiah to the doorposts of our hearts.