

## Yahweh Versus the Gods of Egypt

Though the ten plagues that Yahweh brought on Egypt are incredibly famous, very few people understand the true nature, significance, and purpose of the plagues. Yahweh was not interested in redeeming Israel just from their slavery to Egypt but also from their false worship and slavery to the pagan gods.

### The Superiority of Yahweh

It is clear from the text that Yahweh's main purpose in sending Moses into Egypt was to lead His people out of Egypt in order to redeem them and make them into a great nation. However, the question is why did He not just quickly overcome Pharaoh and led the people out; this would have been incredibly simple for Him. Why is it that He brought the ten plagues in order to bring the end result of the exodus?

Yahweh brought the ten plagues in order to demonstrate His total sovereignty over all the gods of the most powerful nation in the world. This is seen most clearly at the final plague where Yahweh says, "and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment" (Ex. 12:12). Likewise in Num. 33:4 He states that the plagues were an attack on the gods of Egypt.

Yahweh demonstrates His power in order to show that He is the only true God and the only one who is worthy of worship. The gods were seen as limited in power to the land and people that worshiped them. The plagues demonstrated that Yahweh is not limited to a certain region; His sovereignty and power are universal. Thus He gave not only the nations a powerful and unforgettable demonstration of His sovereignty and power (Josh. 2:8-13) but also to Israel, in order to encourage them to never go after lesser gods.

Thus we can see Yahweh's sovereignty clearly in His superiority over all the so-called gods of Egypt. He displayed His great power in all of His activity that resulted in the liberation of the Israelites and His adoption of them as His people.

### The Purposes of the Plagues

Though there are probably many purposes for the ten plagues four major ones stand out in the Bible. Yahweh desired to both defeat Egypt and redeem Israel through the plagues.

#### ***To Destroy the Gods of Egypt***

The Egyptians were the most polytheistic people known in the ancient world. Even to this day it is not known how many gods there were, and many of them overlap. Thus the Egyptian religion is one of the most difficult ancient religions to analyze.

"It is impossible to sketch a picture of a belief which is uniform and logical in all its details, and valid for the whole of Egypt, for such a uniform belief never existed. The Egyptian religion is not the creation of a single thinker, but an outcome of local, political and cultural divergences, and there was never a strong enough force in Egypt to eliminate all local beliefs or unite them in a general theological system equally binding to Egyptians of all classes and places."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jaroslav Cerny. *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 39.

To a certain degree the gods of Egypt were quite different from the deities of the surrounding countries. They did not require the sacrifice of humans or the annihilation of people who held different opinions. However, it was nonetheless morally and spiritually degrading.

Almost all living creatures, as well as many inanimate objects, were considered the embodiment of a god. In addition to these, there were also anthropomorphic gods: men in the prime of their life, such as Amun, Atum, or Osiris.

The New Kingdom brought many changes to the Egyptian religion. The process of syncretism increased rapidly, assimilating Semitic deities from the north as well as adding new concepts to firmly established ones. It is apparent from Ex. 12:12 that at least one of the plagues was directed towards “all the gods of Egypt.” And Num. 33:4 indicates that all the plagues were directed towards the gods of Egypt.

### ***To Defeat the Pharaoh of Egypt***

Unlike other rulers in the ancient Near East, the Egyptian Pharaoh did not merely rule for the gods, but he was literally one of the gods. As far as his physical existence was concerned, Pharaoh had been begotten by Amon-Re upon the queen mother. As to his divine power, he was Horus, the son of Hathor.

The plagues served to demonstrate the lack of Pharaoh’s power, both as ruler and god. He was subject to the same frustrations and anxieties as any other man, indicated by the fact that he called upon Moses and Aaron rather than the wise men during the greatest times of distress.

### ***To Humiliate the Egyptian Religious Functionaries***

Wise men, sorcerers, magicians and priests were an important part of Egyptian bureaucracy. The priests especially held high positions and were very powerful in Egypt—sometimes with greater influence than the Pharaoh himself.

“An Egyptian official would have been baffled by the suggestion that he render unto Caesar those things which were Caesar’s and unto God those things which were His. Caesar was God—or at least god—and there was no functional difference between church and state. At some periods a single man might hold both vizierate and high priesthood of Amon, the supreme civil and sacerdotal positions. This concept explains, to some extent, the apparent overlapping of functions which we find in so many official careers.”<sup>2</sup>

The plagues pointed out to the Egyptians the inability of the priests to function in such a way as to turn the tide of calamity.

### ***To Redeem the People of Israel***

The plagues of Egypt served as a visual lesson to Israel regarding the worthlessness of idolatrous forms of worship. They were used by Yahweh to demonstrate His awesome power not only in the redemption of His people from the land of Egypt, but also in His capability for caring for them and providing for their future needs.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Mertz. *Temples, Tombs and Hieroglyphs: The Story of Egyptology*, p. 145.

## Egyptian Historical Records

Most ancient civilizations were less concerned with recording history accurately as they were with recording history in a way that made them look grand and superior to those around them.

“The peoples of the ancient Near East kept historical records to impress their gods and also potential enemies, and therefore rarely, if ever, mentioned defeats or catastrophes. Records of disasters would not enhance the reputation of the Egyptians in the eyes of their gods, nor make their enemies more afraid of their military might.”<sup>3</sup>

Pharaoh was inseparably connected to the course of events that occurred in Egypt for he was the “lord of the world” and a god. An event like the plagues that so humiliated the Pharaoh and Egypt’s gods would not make it into their historical records.

“The Egyptians suffered from a sort of official amnesia with regard to the unpleasant facts; one has the feeling that the conquest (by the Hyksos) would never have been mentioned at all if there had been a reasonable way of glorifying a king for liberating his country without referring to what he was liberating it from.”<sup>4</sup>

Some critics would like to explain the plagues of Egypt away as merely natural events that were common in Egypt. However, there are several reasons why these cannot be merely natural acts of nature. First, while many of these things are known to happen in Egypt they were intensified beyond any normal occurrence (Ex. 10:6-7). Second the fact that Moses predicted the arrival and end sets them apart from normal events (Ex. 8:10, 23; 9:5, 18, 29; 10:4). Third all these plagues came within the period of one year, the likes of which have never been recorded as happening in other countries (Ex. 10:6-7). Fourth the plagues were discriminatory for they did not occur in the land of Goshen where Israel was living (Ex. 8:22; 9:4, 26). Fifth there was a gradual increase in severity of the nature of the plagues, concluding with the death of the firstborn son.

## The Plagues of Egypt

Though Egypt had thousands of gods, many of them overlapping and evolving throughout history, the following is a description of the most prominent gods that the plagues would have affected.

### ***Rods and Serpents (7:8-13)***

The cobra was almost always portrayed rearing up and with its hood dilated. The Greek word *uraeus* is typically used to describe the cobra in this pose. The word may have its origins from the Egyptian words, which meant “she who rears up.” The species of cobra represented as the uraeus is the *Naja haje*. The uraeus was a symbol for various things from early times including: the sun, Lower Egypt, the king and a number of deities.

Egyptian goddesses were creator deities, and the protectors of the pharaohs in the form of the cobra, vulture, or lioness. The two “protectors of the realm” of Egypt were originally Nekhbet, vulture goddess of Upper Egypt, and Wadjet, cobra goddess of Lower Egypt. It is Wadjet who rears up over his brow on the royal crowns and headdresses, and she has the power to blast the enemies of the pharaoh. The Egyptians chose the cobra and the vulture as the royal symbols

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<sup>3</sup> Charles F. Aling. *Egypt and the Bible History*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Mertz. *Temples, Tombs and Hieroglyphs: The Story of Egyptology*, p. 150.

because they were thought to be self-producing and therefore creators, or divine. Together they symbolized the unification of the two lands. The creatures also appear together in the pharaoh's neby or "Two Ladies" name.

The cobra was also called the "fiery eye" of Re and two uraei were sometimes depicted on either side of the solar disk.

The fact that Yahweh turned the rod into a cobra suggests that He is the one who held true sovereignty over the god from whom they sought protection. Yahweh used this sign to demonstrate to Pharaoh that He was such a great threat that not even their god of protection could stand against Him. This is emphasized in the fact that Yahweh's serpent swallowed the serpents of the magicians. The sign was designed to confirm the fact that the message brought by Moses and Aaron was indeed from Yahweh, whom Pharaoh had refused to obey.



The magicians were able to recreate the sign. However, it is known that the art of charming the cobra is a skill practiced in Egypt, and this kind of conjuring was not uncommon. The cobra can be rendered immobile if pressure is applied to the muscles at the nape of its neck. This trick was satisfactory for Pharaoh, and he was not impressed with Moses and would not listen as the Lord had said. However, Pharaoh should have taken notice to the significance of Yahweh's cobra swallowing the magician's serpents.

### ***Plague One: The Sacred Nile River Turned to Blood (7:14-24)***

"Egypt was the gift of the Nile." From ancient times to the present, the Nile has been the lifeblood of Egypt. There is no other country in ancient or modern times that has been so dependent on its waterways as ancient Egypt. Transportation on the Nile led to widespread shipbuilding and development of ports. Sea commerce through the Nile provided many important products for Egypt.

Most important was the agricultural life that the Nile brought to Egypt. The annual rise and flooding provided new deposits of fertile soil along with water for the surrounding fields. The Nile extended agricultural life eight miles to either side of its banks. The Nile not only brought irrigation for crops, but it also supplied its marshes for pasture and hunting wild game so often depicted in their paintings. The river also contained a wealth of fish that was basic to the diet of the Egyptian. Beyond the life of the Nile was nothing but lifeless desert, and the Egyptians knew that without the Nile, Egypt would be as barren as the deserts on either side and there would be no life for them.

Not only were the gods associated with the Nile, but also fertility, blessing and happiness were associated with the faithfulness of the river.

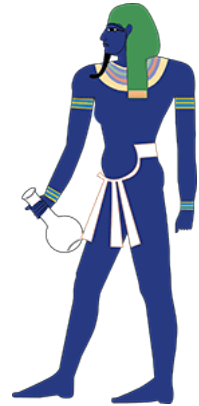
"Hail to thee, Oh Nile, that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive!... He that waters the meadows which Recreated, in order to keep every kid alive. He that makes to drink the desert and the place distant from water: that is his dew coming down (from) heaven."

"If he is sluggish, then nostrils are stopped up and everybody is poor. If there be (thus) a cutting down in the food offerings of the gods, then million men perish among mortals, covetousness is practiced. The entire land is in a fury, and great and small are on the execution block (but) people are different when he approaches. Khnum constructed him.

When he rises, then the land is jubilation, then every belly is in joy, every backbone takes laughter, and every tooth is exposed.”<sup>5</sup>

Hapi was believed to be the “spirit of the Nile” and its “dynamic essence.”

“He thus became a partner with the great original gods who had created the world, and finally came to be regarded as the maker and molder of everything within the universe. We find him credited with the attributes of Nu, the primeval water-mass, and this in effect made him a father of Ra, who had emerged from that element. Hapi, indeed, stood in more immediate relationship to the Egyptians than almost any other god in their pantheon. Without the sun Egypt would have been plunged into darkness, but without the Nile every living creature within its borders would assuredly have perished.”<sup>6</sup>



Many of Egypt’s gods were also associated either directly or indirectly with the Nile and its productivity. The great Khnum was considered the guardian of the Nile sources, as well as the creator of people. One of the greatest gods revered was Osiris, who was the god of the underworld. The Egyptians believed that the river Nile was his bloodstream.

Tauret was the hippopotamus goddess of the river. Neith, the eloquent warlike goddess took a special interest in the Lates, the largest fish in the Nile. Hathor was supposed to have protected the Chromis, a slightly smaller fish.



The god Sepek took the form of a crocodile. In Thebes there was a temple constructed in his honor where a crocodile would swim in a pool of water taken from the Nile. A lady of high rank would in reverence drink from the same pool that the crocodile was in. Ordinary crocodiles were mummified throughout the whole of Egypt and placed in underground caverns.

Ex. 7:19 states that the plague was not just limited to the Nile but included the branches of the Nile and water that had been stored. This would have affected the irrigation of their crops, and the bacteria that would have come with the blood would have killed the fish as well. The text also tells us that there was no drinking water for the Egyptians, except what they had to dig for.

Ex. 7:25 states that seven days passed from when the Lord struck the Nile to when He told Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh with the second plague. It is not clear whether this statement marks the end of the plague or whether it lasted into the following plague as well; the text seems to suggest the former.

The magicians were able to mimic the plagues by their secret arts to the satisfaction of the Pharaoh. Pharaoh’s heart was hardened by Yahweh so that he was unaffected by the plague.

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<sup>5</sup> ANET. *Hymn to the Nile*, trans. by John A. Wilson, p. 272.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Spence. *Ancient Egyptian Myths and Legends*, p. 170.

### **Plague Two: Frogs in the Land (7:25-8:15)**

The presence of frogs in Egypt was not unusual for they were common to the marshlands, depicted in numerous Egyptian paintings and inscriptions. To the Egyptian the frog represented fruitfulness, blessing and the assurance of a harvest. The sacredness and the significance of the frog are demonstrated by the discovery of amulets in the form of frogs.



The goddess Heqet, a frog, was the wife of the great god Khnum. She was the symbol of resurrection and the emblem of fertility and assisted in childbirth (consider the irony in the statement that the frogs invaded pharaoh's bedroom and even jumped on his bed). Heqet was one of the four primeval gods who personified the primeval water, infinity, darkness, and that which is hidden. At that time nothing evil existed and everywhere abundance reigned.

In December, the Nile receded from its flooding stage, leaving behind ponds and marshes, and the sound of frogs would fill the air as they claimed these waters. To the farmer this sound indicated that the gods who controlled the Nile and made the land fertile had completed their work. This demonstrated that Hapi was active for he was the one who controlled the soil deposits and the waters that made the land fertile, guaranteeing the coming harvest.

The frog was one of numerous animals that must not be intentionally killed—even the involuntary killing of a frog was often punished with death.

Yahweh turned the frog, which was seen as pleasant and desirable to the Egyptian, into something loathsome and overwhelming.

“Like a blanket of filth the slimy, wet monstrosities covered the land, until men sickened at the continued squashing crunch of the ghastly pavement they were forced to walk upon. If a man's feet slipped on the greasy mass of their crushed bodies, he fell into an indescribably offensive mass of putrid uncleanness, and when he sought water to cleanse himself, the water was so solid with frogs, he got no cleansing there.”<sup>7</sup>

Not only would the plague be seen as the gods being against them, but the people were forced to kill the embodiment of the god Heqt simply because of the sheer number that would have been underfoot. Likewise, the frog's connection to the water supplies, like the plague of blood, would have continued to rob them of their clean drinking water.

The magicians were able to reproduce the production of frogs; it is not clear how they were able to do this. What is clear is that they were not able to remove the plague. Pharaoh begged of Moses and Aaron to rid the land of the frogs. Moses asked Pharaoh to pick the time for the plague to end. This emphasizes the fact that the magicians could not even do this. Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not listen to them after finding relief from the plague.

### **Plague Three: Dust and Gnats (8:16-19)**

Ex. 8:16 says the dust of the land literally became gnats. The Hebrew term may come from the Egyptian word *chenemes*, which means “gnats” or “mosquitoes.” Nevertheless, it was like the dust in number and size.

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<sup>7</sup> Harry Rimmer. *Dead Men Tell Tales*, p. 105.

They were "...a species of gnats, so small as to be hardly visible to the eye, but with a sting which, according to Philo and Origin, causes a most painful irritation of the skin. They even creep into the eyes and nose, and after the harvest they rise in great swarms from the inundated rice fields."<sup>8</sup>

It is not clear against what specific deities this plague was directed, but it may have been directed towards Geb, the great god of the earth. Egyptians gave offerings to Geb for the bounty of the soil—yet it was from "the dust of the soil" that this plague originated.

It is very possible that it was designed to humiliate the official priesthood. The priests in Egypt were a group that was to be reckoned with not only religiously but also economically and politically, for they controlled the minds and the hearts of the people.

"The priests in Egypt were noted for their physical purity. Daily rites were performed by a group of priests known as the *Uab* or 'pure ones.' Their purity was basically physical rather than spiritual. They were circumcised, shaved the hair from their heads and bodies, washed frequently, and were dressed in beautiful linen robes. In the light of this it would seem rather doubtful that the priesthood in Egypt could function very effectively having been polluted by the presence of these insects. They, like their worshipers, were inflicted with the pestilence of this occasion. Their prayers were made ineffective by their own personal impurity with the presence of gnats on their bodies."<sup>9</sup>

This would be significant because the priests would not be able to enter the temple to pray to their gods for deliverance because of their physical defilement.

Ex. 8:17 states that the gnats irritated both man and beast, and included all of Egypt. This is significant since the previous two plagues seemed to be concentrated in the capital and along the Nile and were not a direct attack against the living by causing pain. The small insects were around in great numbers, and the Egyptians dedicated much of their effort and resources to constructing devices to keep them away, especially from the Pharaoh and the priests.

The magicians attempted to duplicate the plague but were unable. It is clear that from here on out Yahweh was not going to allow them to have any power of any kind. He had put them in their place. Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart and that he did not listen.

### ***Plague Four: Flies in the Royal Palace (8:20-32)***

The text here does not use the word "flies;" rather, it uses the Hebrew word for "swarms." The idea of the flies comes from the Septuagint rendering "dog-fly," which may carry some weight since those who translated the Septuagint lived in Egypt.

The blood-sucking dog fly (gadfly) was a great abhorrence and may be responsible for the blindness in the land. It might also be the Ichneumon fly, which deposits its larvae on living



<sup>8</sup> Keil and Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, p. 483.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Davis. *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, p. 111.

things so that it can feed. The Egyptians saw this as the manifestation of the god Uatchit. Many other insects may have been revered in the same way.

It is also known that the fly, in Egyptian mythology, gave protection against disease or misfortune. Stone amulets in the form of flies were being made in Egypt as early as 3500 BC, approximately. The fly was also depicted on various ritual artifacts, including the so-called “magic wands,” often carved from hippopotamus ivory and probably intended to protect the owner from harm.

There are, some scholars who do not accept the Septuagint rendering and think the passage implies the scarab beetle, which was actually a dung beetle. Swarms of scarabs, with mandibles that could saw through wood, were destructive and worse than termites. Deification of the scarab was found in the creator and king god Amon-Ra.

“Ra, the Sole Creator was visible to the people of Egypt as the disc of the sun, but they knew him in many other forms. He could appear as a crowned man, a falcon or a man with a falcon’s head and, as the scarab beetle pushes a round ball of dung in front of it, the Egyptians pictured Ra as a scarab pushing the sun across the sky.”<sup>10</sup>



In the Hebrew the phrase “grievous swarm” speaks of something oppressive like a yoke. It may also carry the idea of massive numbers or abundance. This communicates the intensity and the severity of the plague and that all in the land are experiencing the wrath of Yahweh.

This is the first plague where it clearly states that Israel would be untouched. Ex. 8:23 states that the Lord would put a “division” between His people and the people of Egypt.

Pharaoh gave in and told Moses that he could take his people into the wilderness and makes sacrifices to Yahweh. However, when the plague ended, Pharaoh hardened his own heart and did not release the people.

### ***Plague Five: Death of Domestic Animals (9:1-7)***

It has already been stated that the Egyptians worshiped and deified almost all animals in Egypt, so this plague would be an attack against many of the gods. Yet it may be more directed against the bull since in the previous section Pharaoh changed his mind in allowing Israel to go and sacrifice.

A large number of bulls and cows were considered sacred, and many areas in Egypt chose them as their emblems. A temple was discovered in Memphis that contained the Apis bull, which was considered the sacred animal of the god Ptah. There could only be one bull at one time in the temple, and it was identified as a deity by twenty-eight physical marks. It was fed delicacies and given as many heifers as it wanted to honor it. In Memphis sixty-four burial chambers were found, each containing a mummified Apis bull.



Hathor—the goddess of love, beauty and joy—was represented by a cow, and was often depicted as a cow suckling the Pharaoh, giving him divine nourishment. In addition to the gods already

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<sup>10</sup> Geraldine Harris. *Gods & Pharaohs from Egyptian Mythology*, p. 24.



mentioned, this plague would have been a direct insult to Khnum, the ram-god, and to Bast, the cat goddess of love. Mnevis, a sacred bull, was also worshiped and was associated with the god Ra.

All of the livestock, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds and flocks, died. This was investigated and confirmed by the representatives of Pharaoh. Once again Israel was unaffected by the plague.

Pharaoh's heart remained hard from the previous plague where he hardened his own heart. Thus he did not respond to Moses and Aaron in letting Israel go.

### **Plague Six: Ashes, Dust and Boils (9:8-12)**

The furnace mentioned here may be one of the furnaces used by the Israelites to bake the bricks that they were forced to make for the Pharaoh. Where previously Yahweh's people experienced the suffering and pain of their slavery, Yahweh now takes the ash from their work and causes it to become suffering to the Egyptians.

Sekhmet, a lion-headed goddess, had the power of both creating epidemics and bringing them to an end. A special priesthood called the *Sunu* was dedicated to her. Amulets were often used by the Egyptians to ward off evil and sickness in their lives.



Serapis was the god of healing, and Imhotep was the god of medicine and the guardian of the healing sciences.

Like the plague of the gnats and flies, this plague would also affect the purity of the priests and hinder them from entering their temples and praying to their gods.

This plague not only affected all of Egypt, but the severity of it is seen in Ex. 9:9 where the boils were breaking out in "blains" and "sores." Even the magicians were so crippled by the plague that when summoned they could not physically go to the palace. Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses.

### **Plague Seven: Hail and Fire (9:13-35)**

The northern part of Egypt gets about two inches of rainfall each year, and in the southern part of Egypt, rain is so rare that sometimes there is no rainfall in an entire year. Ironically, when something does come from the sky, it comes to destroy.

Since this plague originated from the sky, it would have been an attack against Nut, the sky goddess.

"Her most general appearance, however, is that of a woman resting on hands and feet, her body forming an arch, thus representing the sky. Her limbs typified the four pillars on which the sky was supposed to rest. She was supposed to originally to be reclining on Geb, the earth, when Shu raised her from this position."<sup>11</sup>



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<sup>11</sup> Lewis Spence. *Ancient Egyptian Myths and Legends*, p. 173.

Nut was also considered by the Egyptians to be the mother of five other gods: Osiris, Hathor, Set, Isis, and Nephthys.

Other gods were Shu, the wind god, and Horus, the hawk-headed sky god of Upper Egypt. The plague would have also been directed towards those gods who protected the crops, such as Isis and Seth.

This plague would have also damaged many of the monuments that the Egyptians were obsessed with building to honor the glory of the gods and the Pharaoh. Now those glorious images representing their gods were being defaced.

The only crops that were destroyed were flax and barley, which indicates that this occurred in late January or early February. The hail would not just have affected the Egyptians' crops but also their homes. They were confined to their homes while their surviving livestock and crops were being destroyed.

Pharaoh does not send for the magicians, rather he sends directly for Moses and Aaron first. Pharaoh states that he is guilty and asks Moses to pray to Yahweh for the plague to relent. After the plague ends Yahweh hardens Pharaoh's heart and once again resists Moses and Aaron.

### ***Plague Eight: Locusts from the East (10:1-20)***

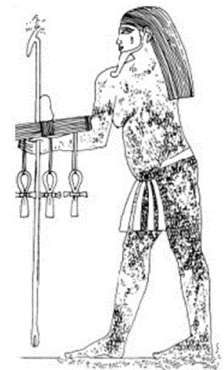
In ancient times, locusts could destroy an entire village's food supply in a matter of minutes. One square mile normally contains from 100,000,000 to 200,000,000 of the creatures. We know of its devastating effects because history supplies us with numerous cases of such.

“No one who has ever seen the locust at work accuses the Bible account of hyperbole. In 1926 and 1927, small swarms of the African migratory locusts were spotted in an area 50 by 120 miles on the plains of the river Niger near Timbuktu. The next year swarms invaded Senegal and Sierra Leone. By 1930 the whole of West Africa was flailing away at the pests with everything moveable. But the locusts didn't seem to notice; swarms reached Khartoum, more than 2,000 miles to the east of Timbuktu, then turned south, spreading across Ethiopia, Kenya, the Belgian Congo, and in 1932, striking into the lush farm land of Angola and Rhodesia. Before the plague finally sputtered out fourteen years after it began, it affected five-million miles of Africa, an area nearly double the size of the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

However, the plague of locusts that Yahweh sent would have made this account look like child's play (Ex. 9:14).

There were many gods associated with the crops of Egypt, for the crops and the Nile were the source for all life in the country. There was Nepri, the god of grain; Osiris, the later god of the grain; Ermutet, the goddess of childbirth and crops; and Thermuthis, the goddess of fertility and the harvest.

There have been discoveries of many amulets in the shape of a locust that were probably worn by the Egyptians to ward off the swarms that would ravage their crops.



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<sup>12</sup> Daniel DaCruz. *Plagues Across the Land*, p. 21.

The locusts were so numerous that Ex. 10:15 says that the whole land was darkened. The locusts would not have just destroyed crops but also the trees and the fruit of the land.

Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron in “haste” and confessed that he had sinned against Yahweh and Moses and Aaron and pleaded for forgiveness and for the plague to cease. However, Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he did not let Israel go.

### **Plague Nine: Darkness in the Land (10:21-29)**

Amon-Ra (Amun-Re) was the chief deity of Egypt and the sun god who was part of very important triad of deities including his wife Mut—the divine mother, queen of all gods, and a bisexual represented by the body of a woman and the head of a vulture—and their son Khons, the god of the moon.

“The moon was a god, perhaps the oldest of all that were worshiped in Egypt; but in the official theology the greatest of the gods was the sun. Sometimes it was worshiped as the supreme deity Ra or Re, the bright father who fertilized Mother Earth with rays of penetrating heat and light; sometimes it was a divine calf, born anew at every dawn, sailing the sky slowly in a celestial boat, and descending into the west, at evening, like an old man tottering to his grave. Or the sun was the god Horus, taking the graceful form of a falcon, flying majestically across the heavens day after day as if in supervision of his realm, and becoming one of the recurrent symbols of Egyptian religion and royalty. Always Ra, or the sun, was the Creator: at his first rising, seeing the earth desert and bare, he had flooded it with his energizing rays, and all living things—vegetable, animal and human—had sprung pell-mell from his eyes, and been scattered over the world.”<sup>13</sup>



The sun god Ra was considered to be a great blessing to the land for his faithfulness in providing the warmth and light of the sun each day without fail.

“Hail to thee, beautiful Re of everyday, who rises at dawn without ceasing, Khepri wearying (himself) without labor! Thy rays are (one’s) face, without one knowing it. Fine gold is not like the radiance of thee. Thou who has constructed thyself, thou didst fashion thy body, a shaper who was (himself) not shaped; unique in his nature, passing eternity, the distant one, under whose guidance are millions of ways, just as thy radiance is like the radiance of heaven and thy color glistens more than its surface.”<sup>14</sup>

In Egyptian mythology Horus was the god of light who personified the life-giving power of the Sun. He was usually represented as a falcon-headed man wearing a sun disk as a crown. There was also the god Ptah, the one who created the moon, the sun and the earth; Atum, the god of the sunset; and Shu, the god of sunlight and air. Khepre, who often appeared in the shape of the scarab, was a form of Ra.

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<sup>13</sup> Will Durant. *History of Civilization*, Vol. 1. “Our Oriental Heritage,” p. 198.

<sup>14</sup> ANET. *The Hymn to the Sun*, pp. 367-68.

The plague would also have been a direct attack against Pharaoh, for he was the divine representation of the sun god Ra. Darkness covered the land for three days, and no one could see anything or leave their homes. Yet where Israel was, they had light!

Pharaoh said that he would allow Moses to take Israel and sacrifice except that they would have to leave their animals behind. Moses stated that they need the livestock in order to make sacrifices. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not allow them to go and told Moses to leave his sight or he would kill him.

### ***Plague Ten: Death of the Firstborn (12:29-42)***

This plague was directed against "all of the gods of Egypt" (Ex. 12:12) and would show the total inability of the gods of Egypt to protect their subjects in the face of unparalleled tragedy.

This plague was potentially more devastating than all of the other plagues combined, for the firstborn was not only the heir of a double portion of his father's inheritance, but represented special qualities of life (cf. Gen. 49:3). The law of primogeniture decreed that the firstborn son would inherit the major portion of a family estate when the father died. The death of the firstborn son would cripple a family legally and emotionally.

This would have been humiliating to Isis, the winged goddess of fertility; Meskhenet, the goddess who presided at the birth of children; to Hathor, one of the seven deities who attended the birth of children; to Min, the god of procreation; to Selket, the guardian of life; and to Renenutet, the cobra-goddess and guardian of Pharaoh.

Not only is this an attack against the gods but also against the Pharaoh. It undermined his immortality through his inability to protect his son, who was a god as well, and it undermined his ability to provide unity and protection over the land of Egypt.

The Hebrew word for plague in Ex. 11:1 describes a "mark" and comes from the Hebrew root word *naga*, meaning to "touch, reach, or strike." Previously, Yahweh had not revealed how many plagues there would be, and now Yahweh reveals that this will be the last one and that it will leave a mark on Egypt. In Ps. 135:8 and Ps. 136:10 the death of the firstborn is the only plague mentioned at all, probably because this plague made such a great impression on future generations.



Whereas all the other plagues affected everything around, this one was selected to affect only the firstborn son of each family. It is interesting to note that even the animals' offspring are included in this distinction.

In the previous plagues Israel was left untouched as a nation, but now Yahweh required an act of faith on their part in order to escape the judgment.

Pharaoh himself was now left without an heir to the throne; this would be devastating to a king, especially one who was the representation of the god Ra.

“Following the death of Thutmose III, his son, Amenhotep II, took the throne and ruled for at least twenty-six years. This king, according to the early date of the exodus, would have been the Pharaoh of the exodus and the one who lost his firstborn son in the final judgment of God (Exodus 12). Some have seen a relationship between the death of Amenhotep's firstborn son and the well-known 'Dream Stela' of Thutmose IV, his son and successor to the throne. In

this document the god Har-em-akht promised the throne to Thutmose IV on the condition that he restore the exposure of the great sphinx which apparently had been largely covered by drifting sand. It is their view that this Dream Stela represents an attempt at legitimizing his right to the throne, since he was apparently not the firstborn son.”<sup>15</sup>

Pharaoh let Israel go to sacrifice to their God, but it is not clear whether he had intended to free them and then changed his mind or only gave them permission to go and come back and then pursued them because they fled. Nevertheless, Pharaoh did change his mind when he realized that he had lost such a large work force, because Yahweh hardened his heart, and then he pursued them with his army.

### ***The Plagues as De-Creation***

In Exodus 7-12 God took the creation order of Genesis 1 and reversed it, turning that order and structure into chaos to bring judgment on Egypt. What was originally declared good in Genesis 1 is now a curse on the Egyptians.<sup>16</sup>

The plagues are a further attack on the gods of Egypt since they were credited for the creation of the earth and humanity. Now the true Creator is undoing creation right before them to show who really has the power, as if to say, “I brought you into this world, and I can take you out.”

A further testament to the divine power and protection of Yahweh is the fact that through the de-creation of Egypt Israel remains unaffected. Israel experiences life and God’s creation as the Egyptians suffer around them. They will then be recreated into a new creation and nation through the exodus and their entrance into the Promised Land.

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<sup>15</sup> John J. Davis. *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> See John D. Currid. *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, pp. 115-17.

<b>Creation Day</b>	<b>Creation Description</b>	<b>Plague on Egypt</b>	<b>Plague Description</b>
Day 1 Gen. 1:1-5	Light out of darkness	Plague 9 Ex. 10:21-29	Darkness prevailing over light
Day 2 Gen. 1:6-8	Ordering and separation of the waters	Plague 1 Ex. 7:15-25	Chaos and destruction due to water changed into blood
Day 3 Gen. 1:9-13	Appearance of dry land and creation of vegetation	Plagues 7-8 Ex. 9:18-10:20	Destruction of vegetation by hail and locusts
Day 4 Gen. 1:14-19	Creation of luminaries	Plague 9 Ex. 10:21-29	Darkening of luminaries
Day 5 Gen. 1:20-23	Creation of birds and fish of the sea	Plagues 1-2 Ex. 7:15-8-15	Death of fish; multiplication and death of frogs
Day 6 Gen. 1:24-31	Creation of land animals and humans	Plagues 3-4 Ex. 8:16-24 Plague 5 Ex. 9:1-7 Plague 6 Ex. 9:8-17 Plague 10 Ex. 11-12	Pestilence of insects  Death of beasts  Boils on beasts and humans  Death of firstborn

### ***The Creation of Israel into a Nation***

The exodus is seen as a second act of creation for Israel in Exodus 13-15. The redemptive creation of Israel at the sea is cast in the same narrative style of the original creation account in Genesis 1.

The first act is that the divine pillar of fire brings light out of the darkness of Egypt (Ex. 13:21) as seen in the first day of creation (Gen. 1:1-5). At the sea the waters are divided (Ex. 14:21) as seen in the second day of creation (Gen. 1:6-8), and dry land is revealed (Ex. 14:29) as seen in the third day of creation (Gen. 1:9-13).

Deut. 32:11 discusses Yahweh's care of Israel as it passed through the sea and is compared to an eagle hovering over and protecting her young. The Hebrew word *rahap* ("hovers") is same word used in Gen. 1:2 where the Spirit of God was "hovering" over the water.

### ***The Sea***

Yahweh uses the chaos of the sea in order to judge the Egyptians (Isa. 51: 9-10), much like He did in Noah's day (Gen. 6:11-21; 7:17-24), and then He subdues the chaos in order to establish His new people, much like He did in the creation of the universe for Adam and Eve (Gen. 1-2; Ps. 74:12-17; 89).

Ex. 14:21 states that "the Lord drove the sea apart by a strong east wind," and Ex. 15:8 states, "by the blast of your nostrils the waters were piled up." Ex. 15:10 states, "you blew with your breath, and the sea covered them." It is by the wind that Yahweh controls the waters of the sea and moves it about as He desires. Just as the wind/spirit of God moved across the sea in Gen. 1:3 and God sent the wind to cause the waters to recede after the flood (Gen. 8:1), so also He controls the raging sea here by dividing them and then causing them to devour the Egyptians.

Yahweh acting as a divine warrior who uses the sea to destroy His enemies is seen clearly in the poem of Exodus 15.

"The poem of Ex. 15 celebrates Yahweh present *with* his people and doing *for* them as no other god anywhere and at any time *can* be present to do. As such, it is a kind of summary of the theological base of the whole of the book of Exodus."<sup>17</sup>

Ps. 77:13-20 tells of Yahweh ruling over the waters as they tremble in fear at His power. He is seen as a divine warrior who walks through the divided sea (chaos and evil) and leads His people safely through. Isa. 51:9-10 also speaks to Yahweh's defeat of the sea at the exodus when the author cries out to Him to act again as He did on that day. In the historical accounts of the exodus, the sea is seen as a tool that Yahweh uses to destroy Egypt; in poetry, the sea is seen as representing evil (Egypt), which Yahweh successfully defeats so that He can deliver His people.

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<sup>17</sup> John I. Durham. *Exodus*, p. 210.

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