10 PLAGUES FOR HEBREWS NOT EGYPTIANS By John Gagliardi



It is amazing how you can read something a hundred times, and just gloss over it, without really thinking it through and digging into it for deep meaning and significance. For me, this has been the case with the story in the Book of Exodus about the 10 plagues of Egypt - until recently, that is.

Each time I have read through the story, I have not really thought much about it, other than a vague sense that those nasty Egyptians got pretty much what they deserved, after all the cruel things they had done to the Hebrew slaves, making their lives "bitter with hard bondage" (Exodus 1:14).

It also occurred to me that it was a bit odd that God brought the plagues on the Egyptians, knowing that in spite of them, Pharaoh would continue to "harden his heart" and refuse to let them go. But again I just let it go even though I read the Bible through on average three times each year, there remain many, many things I do not understand, and probably never will on this side of eternity.

It had never occurred to me that there was a deeper meaning to each of the 10 plagues that God brought down on the Egyptians, until a few nights ago, when a friend was talking about this topic at a Marketplace Ministry forum in Brisbane.

He taught that each of the plagues was aimed at a specific Egyptian God, and that in essence, God was not doing it to punish the Egyptians, so much as to prove to the Hebrews that He was mightier than the mightiest of the gods of their masters, the Egyptians - information they would need during their unintended and difficult 40 years trudging through the wilderness.

Indeed, they had no sooner left Egypt on their great "exodus" than Pharaoh came after them to drive them into the Red Sea - almost before they knew it, their faith in the God Moses had preached to them was being tested.

A quick study of the 10 plagues and the corresponding pantheon of Egyptian gods is fascinating:

- Plague One water turned to blood aimed at the Nile-gods Hapi and Khnum, with a side-swipe at Osiris the god of the underworld (the Egyptians believed the Nile was his bloodstream) and Tauret, the hippopotamus goddess of the river.
- Plague Two frogs aimed at the fertility god Heqt. (usually depicted as a frog)
- Plague Three gnats from the dust aimed at the earth god Geb and Thoth lord of magic. (as the Egyptians magicians were powerless to prevent it)
- Plague Four swarms of flies (possibly the blood-sucking gadflies) aimed at the god of beetles and flies, Kheper, and Ptah, Egypt's creator of the universe.
- Plague Five death of livestock aimed at the bull god Apis and the cow goddess Hathor.
- Plague Six boils aimed at the healing deities Thoth and Isis and very specifically at Imhotep the god of medicine.
- Plague Seven hail aimed at the sky god Horus and goddess Nut, and also the god of thunder and lightning Reshpu; additionally, Nut was regarded as the mother of five other gods Osiris, Hathor, Set, Isis, and Nephthys.
- Plague Eight locusts aimed at the god of crops Seth, fertility god Min, the locust-headed god Senehem, Nepri god of grain, Ermutet goddess of childbirth and crops, and Thermuth goddess of fertility and the harvest.
- Plague Nine darkness aimed at the sun god Ra (or Amon-Ra) and also at Horus the pre-eminent god of light and sun, Ptah creator of the sun and moon and earth, Tem god of the sunset and Shu god of sunlight and air.
- Plague Ten death of the firstborn aimed at the god-incarnate of Egypt, Pharaoh, also depicted as Ra (Amon-Ra), and by extension his firstborn son and the next supreme god-to-be on earth

A quick search will find many more Egyptians deities that could be added to the above list, but without doubt, the main target was Pharaoh himself, worshiped by the Egyptians as the supreme god on earth, and representing many other gods: "Pharaoh was a god, always the son of Amon-Ra, ruling not merely by divine right but by divine birth, as a deity transiently tolerating the earth as his home."

"On his head was the falcon, symbol of Horus and totem of the tribe; from his forehead rose the uraeus or serpent, symbol of wisdom and life, and communicating magic virtues to the crown. The king was chief-priest of the faith, and led the great processions and ceremonies that celebrated the festivals of the gods. It was through this assumption of divine lineage and powers that he was able to rule so long with so little force." (Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage*, Volume 1, p. 201).

According to David Padfield in an article Against All the Gods of Egypt, the first nine plagues were similar to plagues that had struck the land of Egypt from the time immemorial: "It appears as though God Divinely intensified these plagues and brought them to pass at the time of His choosing.

"These plagues were not just against Pharaoh and his people, but also 'against all the gods of Egypt' (Exodus 12:12). Every one of the plagues was a direct insult to the gods of Egypt. It has been my observation that many people study the plagues and focus only on the plague itself, and totally ignore that fact that these plagues were directed "against all the gods of Egypt" (Exodus 12:12)".

David Padfield in his fascinating and scholarly article emphasises that the tenth plague - which included the death of Pharaoh's first-born son, was by far the most devastating to the entire Egyptian life and theology:

"This (tenth) plague was directed against all of the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12) and would show the total inability of the gods of Egypt to protect their subjects. In the face of unparalleled tragedy, 'all of the gods of Egypt' were silent. Where was Meskhenet, the goddess who presided at the birth of children? Where was Hathor, one of the seven deities who attended the birth of children? Where was Min, the god of procreation? Where was <u>Isis</u>, the goddess of fertility? Where was Selket, the guardian of life? Where was Renenutet, the cobra-goddess and guardian of Pharaoh?

"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).

"After the final plague, Pharaoh released the children of Israel... (and) three months after leaving Egypt, they came to Sinai, where the Mosaic Law would be revealed (Exodus: 19-24)".

The hand of the Almighty God of the Hebrews was so very obvious in the chaos and fear caused by the ten plagues, especially the last and most devastating, which not just showed Jehovah more powerful than the entire pantheon of Egyptian deities, but in a blow robbed the Egyptians of their next supreme god, the Pharaoh's first-born son. It is little wonder that he finally conceded, and let the Hebrews go!

There is little doubt that the priests and people of Egypt would have been praying up a storm to their various gods and goddesses, all to no avail in the face of the omnipotent Lord God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

To get the Hebrews out of Egypt, after more than four centuries of slavery, God had to show them that He was more powerful than the gods of their masters, the Egyptians. The plagues were aimed, ultimately, not at the Egyptians, but at the Hebrews - to demonstrate God's power, and to give them the faith to leave everything that was safe and familiar (if uncomfortable).

Their first test came very quickly at the Red Sea, and in spite of witnessing the miracles of the 10 plagues, and the Passover, and the pillar of fire by

night and the pillar of cloud by day, they immediately fell back into fear when they saw Pharaoh and his 600 chariots looming out of the desert to take revenge and drive them into the sea (Exodus 14:5-10).

"So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord" (Exodus 14:10). If nothing else, they had learned from the plagues that they could cry out to the Lord, and in quick order, God reassured them through Moses that He had the whole matter in hand, in spite of the threatening and seemingly impossible circumstances:

"Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:13 and 14).

God showed Himself again to be the all-powerful God of the entire universe not only had He brought the 10 plagues on the Egyptians, showing their gods and goddesses to be false and powerless, but now He rolled back the Red Sea, and allowed the children of Israel to cross over on dry ground, in the process bring the water back over the pursuing Egyptians and wiping them out to a man (Exodus 14:21,22,27-30).

Indeed, well may we join in the soaring song of Moses, because the God who brought the plagues on Egypt and parted the Red Sea is the same God who is there for us today as we face our day-to-day circumstances and obstacles (Exodus 15:1-18):

I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him.

You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation.

You will bring them in and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which You have made for Your own dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established.

The Lord shall reign forever and ever.