

UNIT 11: THE FIRST BLOW THE PLAGUE OF BLOOD (Exodus 7:14-25)

INTRODUCTION

Text and Textual Notes ¹

7:14 And Yahweh said to Moses, “The heart of Pharaoh is hardened;² he refuses to

¹ With the first plague, or blow on Pharaoh, a new section of the book unfolds. Up to now the dominate theme has been on preparing the deliverer for the exodus. Now, it will focus on preparing Pharaoh for it. The theological emphasis for exposition of the entire series of plagues may be: The sovereign Lord is fully able to deliver His people from the oppression of the world so that they might worship and serve Him alone. The distinct idea of each plague then will have to contribute to this main idea.

It is clear from the outset that God could have delivered His people simply and suddenly. But He chose to draw it out with the series of plagues. There are several reasons here: First, the plagues are designed to judge Egypt. It is justice for slavery. Second, the plagues are designed to inform Israel and Egypt of the nature of Yahweh. Everyone must know that it is Yahweh doing all these things. The Egyptians must know this before they are destroyed. And third, the plagues are designed to deliver Israel.

The first plague is the plague of blood: God has absolute power over the sources of life. Here Yahweh strikes the heart of Egyptian life with death and corruption. The lesson is that God can turn the source of life into the prospect of death. Moreover, the Nile was venerated; so by turning it into death Moses was showing the superiority of Yahweh.

² The word here is *kabed*.

release³ the people. **7:15** Go to Pharaoh in the morning when⁴ he goes out to the water, and position yourself⁵ to meet him by the edge of the Nile;⁶ and take⁷ in your hand the rod⁸ which you turned into a snake. **7:16** And you shall say to him, ‘Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to you to say,⁹ ‘Release my people, that they may serve me¹⁰ in the desert!’ But up til now¹¹ you have not

³ The *piel* infinitive construct *l’shallakh* serves as the direct object of *me’en*, telling what Pharaoh refuses (characteristic perfect) to do. The whole clause is an explanation (like a metonymy of effect) of the first clause that states that Pharaoh’s heart is hardened.

⁴ The clause begins with *hinneh*; here it provides the circumstances for the instruction for Moses--he is going out to the water so go meet him. A temporal clause translation captures the connection between the clauses.

⁵ The instruction to Moses continues with this perfect tense with *waw* consecutive following the imperative. The verb means “to take a stand, station oneself.” It seems that Pharaoh’s going out to the water was a regular feature of his day, and that Moses could be there waiting to meet him.

⁶ The Nile, the source of fertility for the country, was deified by the Egyptians. There were religious festivals held to the god of the Nile, especially when the Nile was inundated. The Talmud suggests that Pharaoh in this passage went out to the Nile to make observations as a magician about its level. Others (including *J. Targ.*) suggest he went out simply to bathe, or to check the water level (Ibn Ezra)--but that would not change the view of the Nile that was prevalent in the land.

⁷ *tiqqakh*, the *qal* imperfect of *laqakh*, functions here as the imperfect of instruction, or injunction perhaps, given the word order of the clause.

⁸ The final clause begins with the noun and a *waw* disjunctive. This singles this instruction out for special attention--“now the rod . . . you are to take.”

⁹ The form *le’mor* is the *qal* infinitive construct with the *lamed* preposition. It is used so often exegetically that it has achieved idiomatic status--“saying” (if translated at all). But here it would make better sense to take it as a purpose infinitive. God sent him to say these words.

¹⁰ The imperfect tense with the *waw* (*w^eya’abduni*) following the imperative is in volitive sequence, showing the purpose--“that they may serve me.” The word “serve” (*abad*) is a general term to include religious observance and obedience.

¹¹The final *ad-koh*, “until now,” narrows the use of the perfect tense to the preset perfect: “you have not listened.” That verb, however, means more than “listen to.” It has the idea of responding to, hearkening, and in some places obeying; here complying catches the point of

complied. **7:17** Thus says Yahweh, ‘In this you will know that I am Yahweh: I am going to strike¹² the water of the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood.¹³ **7:18** And fish¹⁴ in the Nile will die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will be unable¹⁵ to drink the water of the Nile.’ **7:19** Then Yahweh said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers and over their canals,¹⁶ and over their ponds and over all their reservoirs,¹⁷ that they may become¹⁸ blood.’”

what Moses is saying.

¹² The construction using *hinneh* before the participle (here the *hiphil* participle *makkeh*) introduces a *futur instans* use of the participle, expressing imminent future, that, he is about to do something.

¹³ Kaiser summarizes the view that has been adopted by many scholars, including a good number of conservatives, that the plagues overlap with natural phenomena in Egypt. Accordingly, the “blood” would not be literal blood, but a reddish contamination in the water. If there was an unusually high inundation of the Nile, the water flows sluggishly through swamps and is joined with the water from the mountains that washes out the reddish soil. If the flood is high, the water will have a deeper red color. In addition to this discoloration, there is said to be a type of algae which produce a stench and a deadly fluctuation of the oxygen level of the river that is fatal to fish (Walter C. Kaiser, *Exodus*, EBC, p. 350; he cites Greta Hort, “The Plagues of Egypt,” *ZAW* 69 [1957]:84-103, id., 70 [1958]:48-59). While most scholars would agree that the water did not actually become blood (any more than the moon will be turned to literal blood [Joel 2:31]), many are not comfortable with this kind of explanation. If it was a fairly common feature of the Nile, it would not have been any kind of sign to Pharaoh—and it should still be observable. The features that would have to be safeguarded are: it was understood to be done by the rod of God, it was unexpected and not a mere coincidence, and the magnitude of the contamination, color, stench, and death, was unparalleled. God does use natural features in miracles, but to be miraculous signs they cannot simply coincide with natural phenomena.

¹⁴ The definite article here has the generic use, indicating the class—“fish” (Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par. 92).

¹⁵ The verb *la’ah*, here in the *niphal* perfect with a *waw* consecutive, means “be weary, impatient.” The *niphal* meaning is “make oneself weary” in doing something, or “weary (strenuously exert) oneself.” It seems always to indicate exhausted patience (see BDB, p. 521).

The term seems to imply that the Egyptians were not able to drink the red, contaminated water, and so would expend all their energy looking for water to drink—in frustration of course.

¹⁶ Or, “irrigation rivers” of the Nile

¹⁷ The Hebrew term means “gathering,” i.e., wherever they gathered or collected waters,

And blood will be throughout¹⁹ the land of Egypt, even in the wooden vessels and in the stone vessels.” **7:20** And Moses and Aaron did so²⁰ as Yahweh had commanded. Moses lifted up²¹ the rod²² and struck the water of the Nile before the eyes of²³ Pharaoh and before the eyes of his servants;²⁴ and all the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood.²⁵ **7:21** When the fish²⁶ that were in the

notably cisterns and reservoirs. This would naturally lead to the inclusion of both wooden and stone vessels--down to the smallest gatherings.

¹⁸ The imperfect tense with the sequential *waw* indicates the purpose of result after the imperative: “in order that they be(come) blood.”

¹⁹ Or, “in all”

²⁰ Both Moses and Aaron had tasks to perform. Moses, being the “god” to Pharaoh, dealt directly with him and the Nile. He would strike the Nile. But Aaron, “his prophet,” would stretch out the rod over the rest of the waters of Egypt. There is no reason to see two different accounts being woven together by a redactor.

²¹ Text has “and he raised”

²² Gesenius calls the preposition on “rod” the **B.**, is *instrumenti*, used to introduce the object (GKC, par. 119q). This construction provides a greater emphasis than an accusative.

²³ The text could be rendered “in the presence of,” or simply “before,” but the literal idea of “to the eyes of” may stress that he did this in their plain sight.

²⁴ Cassuto notes that the striking of the water was not a magical act. It signified two things: (1) the beginning of the sign, which was in accordance with God’s will, which Moses had previously announced, and (2) to symbolize actual “striking,” wherewith the Lord strikes Egypt and its gods (see v. 25) (*Exodus*, p. 98).

²⁵ There have been various attempts to explain the details of this plague or blow. One possible suggestion is that the plague turned the Nile into “blood,” but that it did not remain, but gradually and fairly quickly turned back to its normal color and substance. However, the effects of the “blood” polluted the water so that dead fish and other contamination left it undrinkable. This would explain how the magicians could also do it--they would not have tried if all water was already turned to blood. It also explains why Pharaoh did not ask for the water to be turned back. This view was put forward by B. Schor in 1856; it is summarized by B. Jacob (who prefers the view of Rashi that the blow only affected water in use), p. 258.

²⁶ The clauses in this verse need to be interpreted in their relationships by means of the conjunction. The first clause begins with a *waw* disjunctive, here providing a circumstantial clause to the statement that the water smelled. The *waw* consecutive on the next verb shows

Nile died, the Nile began²⁷ to stink, so that the Egyptians were not able to drink water from the Nile. Blood²⁸ was throughout all the land of Egypt. **7:22** But the magicians of Egypt did the same²⁹ by their secret arts, and so³⁰ the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not listen to them--just as Yahweh had said. **7:23** And Pharaoh turned and went into his house. He did not even take this to heart.³¹ **7:24** All the Egyptians dug around the Nile for water to drink,³² because they were not able to drink from the water of the Nile.

Exegetical Analysis

There will be a general outline of the plagues provided later with the main theological point listed for each. Each passage could be done as a separate message—if someone had or took the luxury of spending ten weeks on them—but most likely one message, maybe two, that will give the survey of the plagues and the point each makes to this section.

Additional Resources

The references included here cover either individual passages or the whole

that the smell was the result of the dead fish in the contaminated water. The result is then expressed with the *waw* beginning the next clause that states that they could not drink it.

²⁷ The preterite could be given a simple definite past translation, but an “ingressive” past would be more likely, as the smell would get worse and worse with the dead fish.

²⁸ Literally, “and there was blood”

²⁹ “thus, so”

³⁰ The *waw* consecutive on the preterite provides the outcome or result of the matter—Pharaoh was hardened.

³¹ The text has *w^elo'-shat libbo gam-lazo't*, which literally says, “and he did not set his heart also to this.” To “put something on the heart” would mean “to consider it.” This Hebrew idiom means that he did not pay attention to it, or take it to heart (cf. 2 Sam. 13:20; Jer. 31:20; Ps. 48:14, 62:11; Prov. 22:17, 24:32). Since Pharaoh had not been affected by this, he did not consider it further.

³² The text stresses that the water of the Nile, and the Nile water that had been diverted or collected for use, was polluted and undrinkable. Water underground also was from the Nile, but it had not been contaminated, certainly not with dead fish, and so would be drinkable.

section of the plagues: Joel Block, "The Ten Plagues of Egypt," *Religious Education* 71 (1976):519-26; Frank E. Eaton, "The Plagues and the Crossing of the Sea," *Rev Exp* 74 (1977):473-82; Jacob J. Enz, "The After Life in the Ninth Plague (Darkness) in Biblical Literature," in *The New Way of Jesus; Essays Presented to Howard Charles* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1980), pp. 29-38; Vincent Duane Frank, "The Ten Plagues of Moses Viewed as a Polemic Against the Gods of Egypt," *DTS Thesis*, 1979; Howard Jacobson, "The Egyptian Plagues in the Palaea Historica," *Byzantion* 47 (1977):363; Marvin H. Pope, "Mid Rock and Scrub. A Ugaritic parallel to Exodus 7:19," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies in Honor of W. S. LaSor* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 146-150; Robert R. Wilson, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," *CBQ* 41 (1979):18-36.

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

With the beginning of the narratives about the plagues on Egypt a new section of the book unfolds. Up til this point the predominant theme has been the preparation of the messenger and the people of Israel for the exodus. Now the book will address the issue of the preparation of Pharaoh for the exodus. The theme running through the plague stories is that of judgment on Pharaoh, and so there will be a similarity of ideas for each section. Nevertheless, each has a unique contribution to the whole.

How you handle this section will depend on how much time you have. If you have the luxury to devote an exposition to each section, then you will have to develop the distinct ideas of each plague in some detail. Otherwise, there will be a sameness in each exposition, i.e., that God judges the wicked with great devastation as he delivers his people. The exposition will have to discover how each plague contributes new ideas to the revelation about the God of Israel and the responsibilities that come from that revelation.

Most likely the exposition of the material will have to be limited to one or two expositions. It may be that plagues 1-9 will have to be addressed in one exposition, and then the tenth by itself. If that is the case then the patterns of the plagues will have to be demonstrated as well as the contribution of each one to the theological message of the whole.

Whichever approach the exposition follows, the expositor will have to explain the purposes of the plagues. It should be clear from the outset that God could have delivered his people simply and suddenly. But no, he chooses instead to draw out the deliverance with this series of judgments. There are three main purposes for the plagues in this book, and each must be developed. First, the plagues are designed to judge Egypt. Here the exposition should stress the talionic justice of the oppression and the enslavement. God's attack on Egypt is retaliation in justice. Second, the plagues are designed to inform Egypt and Israel of the nature of the LORD. Most significant is the fact that everyone knows that it is the LORD who is doing all these things. The Egyptians must know this before they are destroyed, so that they might realize that the LORD is sovereign over their gods. And third, the plagues are designed to deliver Israel. God forces the exodus from Pharaoh as a demonstration of power.

The plagues on Egypt formed God's judgment on the oppressing nation by destroying the economic and religious system of the pagan empire. The working of the plagues covered a period of about a year and a half or even two years, given the kinds of things that are destroyed and the things that were growing in the field. The drawn out nature of the judgment would have a more powerful effect, always leaving Egypt wondering what was to happen next.

Biblical scholars debate the nature of the plagues. Here a difference is often made between what may be called a class A miracle and a class B miracle. If the rivers were actually turned to blood, that would be class A—no human or natural explanation or means. But if the river was polluted by a reddish substance and rendered undrinkable or poisonous, then we would have a class B miracle, a phenomenon that could be explained by natural causes, but the miracle would be in the scope of the problem and the timing. Each interpreter (throughout the Bible) will have to determine this issue point by point, because some miracles in the Bible could be class B, and perhaps should be, and others really must be class A. In some cases it is difficult to decide; one might see how it could be explained naturally, but one might also feel a little uncomfortable with that from time to time. It is not an easy matter.

One critical issue in this account is the problem of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The motif is clearly part of God's judgment on the pagan king who resisted the LORD (“Who is the LORD that I should obey Him”). In Egyptian

religion, when the person died his heart was taken to judgment, i.e., placed on the scale/balance opposite a feather, and if it out weighed the feather he was guilty. When a Pharaoh (believed divine) was embalmed, they put a beetle scarab on his heart to protect it from judgment; this was called the hardening of the heart. When God hardened the heart of the Pharaoh, i.e., made him resist God, it was for the purpose of judging him. Thus, the plagues have a polemical motif.

The overall theological point of the plagues could be worded as follows:

Our sovereign Lord God is fully able to deliver his people
from the oppression of the world
so that they might worship and serve him alone.

Each of the different plagues develop the theme of the LORD's self revelation ("that you might know that I am Yahweh") as the true LORD God. Israel should been encouraged that their God would deliver them from bondage and provide for them in the wilderness.

The plagues all undermine the religion of Egypt. The Nile was venerated as the source of life; but it was turned to blood, the symbol of death. Frogs were considered a force of bounty, or evil spirits; and this superstition was stacked high in the land til it stunk. Lice and flies were detested by the Egyptians who loathed pestilences; and so God brought it on them in abundance. Osiris the bull, Apis and Mnevis as well, Ammon the ram, Sais the sheep, and Mendes the goat, all deities, could not resist the great diseases. Hephaistos was the fire deity, but the hail now was destructive. Locusts were dreaded in the land, and so God brought them to devour what was left. Lord Sun, the god Re, was darkened for three days with an oppressive darkness, but there was light in Israel's camp. And finally, Pharaoh, who was the god Horus in life, became Osiris at death. Numbers 33:4 confirms this religious victory.

Compare also the miracles of Christ over nature that authenticate His person. In fact, a comparison of the motifs of Exodus and the Gospel of John would be most instructive. The motifs: I AM, LORD of nature, Passover, Exodus, Manna, Water, Lawgiver, Tabernacle, sacrifices, High Priest, etc.

The following outline will enable the reader to keep in mind the plagues and their different aspects. Each one strikes one strand of theology, but as they flow together the cumulative effect of the disaster on Egypt is staggering.

- I. The plague of blood: God has absolute power over the **sources of life** (7:14-25).
 - A. Survey: the LORD strikes the heart of Egyptian life (and thereby religion) with death and corruption.
 - B. Lesson: God can turn the source of life into the prospect of death (or, nothing in life is dependable apart from sovereign providence).

- II. The plague of frogs: God has power to **create pestilent life** and **to destroy** it through intercessory prayer (7:25–8:14).
 - A. Survey: The LORD strikes at the heart of a miserable superstition to afflict Egypt.
 - B. Lesson: God uses pestilence to afflict the wicked, and intercessory prayer for its removal to instruct the righteous.

- III. The plague of lice: God can defeat pagan **religious forces** by his ability to create pestilence (8:16-19).
 - A. Survey: The LORD turns the ashes into lice as a demonstration of his sovereign ability to create.
 - B. Lesson: God's power that forces pagans to concede his authority should be instructive to the worshiper.

- IV. The plague of flies: God can inflict **suffering on the wicked** while preserving his worshipers (8:2-32 [16-28]).
 - A. Survey: The LORD forces Pharaoh to submit to the worship of Israel, in theory, by a plague of flies.
 - B. Lesson: God's protection from pestilence is for those who worship him.

- V. The plague of disease: God has complete power over (**venerated**) **animal life** (9:1-7).
 - A. Survey: The LORD ruins the livestock (and thereby the economic and religious values) of the wicked oppressors.
 - B. Lesson: The possessions of the people are in the hand of the LORD for good or evil.

- VI. The plague of boils: God has absolute power over **physical health** (9:8-12).
- A. Survey: The LORD afflicts the people with boils to demonstrate how he can and will interrupt their life.
 - B. Lesson: The worshipers should recognize God's blessing of physical affliction from God.
- VII. The plague of hail: God has authority over the **forces of nature** because the earth belongs to him (9:13-25).
- A. Survey: The LORD uses the (worshiped) forces of fire and water to destroy the crops (and life) of Egypt.
 - B. Lesson: Those who fear the LORD and obey his word will through grace escape the powerful destruction prepared for those who sinfully disregard his word.
- VIII. The plague of locusts: God has authority over **all creatures** to use them to destroy and then to destroy them (10:1-20).
- A. Survey: The LORD raises up destroyers to do His bidding in the land of Egypt, and then drove them to their death in the sea (so too later the Egyptians).
 - B. Lesson: The people of God can confidently trust in God's call to service when they see God raise up destroyers and then remove destroyers.
- IX. The plague of darkness: God is sovereign over the **religious forces** of the pagans (10:21-27).
- A. Survey: God controls nature by darkening the sun and immobilizing the Egyptians, but he gives light to his people.
 - B. Lesson: The people of God can rejoice in the light of the LORD while the pagans remain enveloped in darkness.
- X. The plague of death: God is able to **take human life and will do so** when it is in rebellion to him (11:1-10).
- A. Survey: The LORD announces the plague of the death of the firstborn in talionic justice for the oppression of the firstborn Israel, but provides a way of escape.
 - B. Lesson: The people of God escape the judgment of God in human life by applying the blood of the Lamb in faith in God's

promise.

Note: The Passover

At the climax of the narrative about the plagues is the institution of the Passover (Exodus 12). This was Israel's festival of freedom from bondage. The celebration centered on the meal in the home, a meal of lamb, the animal slain in faith to protect the death of the firstborn son. Thus, people who refused to apply the blood to the doorposts would face death throughout their families—as was the case with Pharaoh's son. Consequently, the firstborn son was redeemed and belonged to the LORD; however, Israelites could pay the redemption price and retain their firstborn, the tribe of Levites being designated to serve the LORD instead of the firstborn sons.

The festival was part of God's prophetic message—in the form of a type. A type is indirect prophecy, i.e., we do not know it was prophetic until the fulfilment, the antetype, comes. Then we can look back and understand that God was instructing Israel to do certain things with a view to the greater meaning. Paul announces that Christ is our Passover (1 Corinthians). So we are invited to trace the analogy between the two historical events and see how the former leads to the latter. For the Christian, Christ is the *Passover* Lamb whose blood was applied so that we would escape the warning of judgment on the world. The words of Jesus in the Upper Room at the Last Supper (Last Passover) provide the new interpretation for the ancient festival.