

UNIT 13: THE THIRD BLOW THE PLAGUE OF LICE (Exodus 8:16-19)

INTRODUCTION ¹

Text and Textual Notes

8:16 And Yahweh said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground, and it will become² gnats³ in all the land of Egypt’.” **8:17** And they did so; and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and he struck the dust of the ground, and it became gnats, on man and on beast. All the dust of the ground became gnats in all the land of Egypt. **8:18** When⁴ the magicians tried to do⁵ the same with their

¹ The third plague is brief and unannounced. Moses and Aaron were simply to strike the dust so that it would become gnats. Not only was this plague unannounced, it was not duplicated by the Egyptians. This was God’s work.

² The verb is the perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive, meaning “and it will be.” When *hayah* is followed by the *lamed* proposition, it means “become.”

³ The noun is *kinnim*. The insect has been variously identified. The older versions used “lice,” which was the reading in the Peshita and Targum (and so Josephus, *Antiq.* ii. 14. 3). The Greek and the Latin had “gnats.” By “gnats” many commentators mean “mosquitoes,” which in and around the water of Egypt were abundant (and the translators of the Greek text were familiar with Egypt). Whatever they were they came from the dust and were capable of flying. “Lice” is rejected because they are not that common in Egypt. B. Jacob argues against these views and prefers “sand fleas,” because gnats do not derive from the dust nor do they afflict man or beast. There is no way to know for sure what they were. Most scholars would accept gnats to be the intention, or something like them, like mosquitoes.

⁴ The preterite with the *waw* consecutive is here subordinated to the main clause as a temporal clause.

⁵ The verb is the simple preterite with the *waw* consecutive, which would normally be translated “and they did.” But the point of the pericope is that they were not able to do this. And so the equivalent of an ingressive perfect must be understood for this verb—“they began to do the same thing” or “they tried.”

secret arts, to bring forth⁶ gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and on beast. **8:19** The magicians said⁷ to Pharaoh, “It is the finger⁸ of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, just as Yahweh had said.

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

This third plague on Egypt is brief and unannounced. Moses and Aaron are simply to smite the dust that it become lice. This was not the first time that the LORD brought life out of the dust. But this was the first time it was a pestilence that came to life, a judgment against the Egyptians who loathed uncleanness and pests. Besides the note of abhorrence that would be natural in such a plague, I would stress the text’s mention of the inability of the Egyptians to do this plague. They cannot create life, and are now forced to retire, and admit that “this is the finger of God,”⁹ an expression comparable to “hand” to show the power of the LORD over life. Of course, Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not listen to them.

This plague marks a new departure: it is an unannounced judgment that could not be duplicated—it was the LORD’s work. At the least, this

⁶ The infinitive construct *l’hotsi*, “to bring forth,” functions as the direct object the verb, and therefore in apposition to *ken*, “thus, so” or “the same thing.” It answers the question of what they tried to do.

⁷ Literally, “and the magicians said”

⁸ The word “finger” is a bold anthropomorphism for God. Later, at the Sea, the reference will be to the “hand” of God. The point of the magicians’ words is clear enough: had it been magic they could have duplicated it, but this was the power of God. The reason for their choice of the word “finger” has occasioned many theories, none of which are entirely satisfying. At the least it would mean it was done by God, with majestic ease and seemingly effortless.

The probable reason that they could not do this was that it was actually producing life—from the dust of the ground. The creative power of God confounded the magic of the Egyptians, and brought on them a loathsome plague.

⁹ Jesus will allude to this passage in his controversy with the Pharisees over exorcism. They said he did it by Satan; he said it was the finger of God—clearly divine, and clearly implying that they were like the magicians in Egypt.

section shows that God's creation of the pestering lice shows his sovereignty over the pagans. The power of God confounds the power of the magicians and brings this loathsome plague on the land. God's "finger work" is only the beginning, for he has yet to touch their lives. At least here some of their number are beginning to know that all power belongs to him.