

UNIT 14: THE FOURTH BLOW THE PLAGUE OF FLIES (Exodus 8:2-32 [16-28])

INTRODUCTION ¹

Text and Textual Notes

8:20 Yahweh² said to Moses, “Get up early in the morning and take your position before Pharaoh as he goes out to the water; and say to him, ‘Thus says Yahweh, “Release my people that they may serve me. **8:21** If you do not release³ my people, then I am going to send⁴ on you and on your servants and on your people, and on your houses swarms of flies.⁵”

¹ The announcement of the fourth plague parallels the first plague. Now there will be flies. Egypt has always suffered from flies, more so in the summer than in the winter. But the flies the plague describes portrays something greater than any normal season for flies.

The main point that can be stressed in this plague comes by tracing the development of the plagues in their sequence. Now, with the flies, we learn that God can inflict suffering on some people and preserve others--a preview of the coming judgment that will punish Egypt but set Israel free. God is fully able to keep the dog-fly in the land of the Egyptians, and save His people from these judgments.

² Literally, “and Yahweh said”

³ The construction uses the predicator of non existence—*en*, “there is not”—with a pronominal suffix prior to the *piel* participle. The suffix becomes the subject of the clause. Literally, it would say, “but if there is not you releasing.” It emphasizes the verbal activity.

⁴ Here again is the *futur instans* use of the participle, now *qal* with the simple meaning “send”: *hin^eni mashliakh*), “here I am sending.”

⁵ The word *arob* means “a mix” or “swarm.” But clearly some insect is intended here. Whatever it means it must refer to some irritating kind of flying insect. Psalm 78:45 says that the Egyptians were eaten or devoured by them. Some suggestions have been made over the years: 1) it could refer to beasts or reptiles, 2) the Greek took it as the dog-fly, a vicious blood-sucking gad-fly, more common in the spring than in the fall, 3) the ordinary house fly, which is a symbol of Egypt in Isaiah 7:18 [Hebrew *z^ebub*], and 4) the beetle, which gnaws and bites plants and animals and materials. The fly probably fits the details of this passage best; the plague would have greatly intensified a problem with flies

The houses of the Egyptians will be full of flies, and even the ground where they are. **8:22** But I will make a distinction⁶ on that day with the land of Goshen, in which my people are staying,⁷ so that no swarms of flies will be there, that you may know that I am Yahweh in the midst of the earth. And I will put a division⁸ between my people and your people. This sign shall be seen⁹ tomorrow.” **8:24** And Yahweh did so. A¹⁰ thick¹¹ swarm of flies came into¹² the house of Pharaoh, and into the houses¹³ of his servants;¹⁴ and throughout the land of Egypt¹⁵ the land was ruined¹⁶ because of the

that already existed.

⁶ *w^ehiphleti* is the *hiphil* perfect of *palah*, “to be separated, distinct” (in the *niphal*). In Psalm 139 it is used to describe how the body is uniquely made—distinct. The verb in the *hiphil* means “to set apart, make separate.” God was going to keep the flies away from Goshen—he was setting that apart. The Greek text assumed that the word was from *pale*, and translated it something like “I will marvelously glorify.”

⁷ The relative clause modifies the land of Goshen as the place “in which my people are dwelling.” But the normal word for “dwelling” is not used here. Instead, *’omed*, “standing” (literally). The land upon which Israel stood was spared the flies and the hail.

⁸ The word in the text is *p^edut*, “redemption.” This would give the sense of making a distinction by redeeming Israel. The editors wish to read *p^elut* instead—“a separation, distinction” to match the verb above. G. I. Davies suggests that a letter was omitted, that the root was *parad*, which would have left a noun formation of *prdt*, “separation.” See Davies, “The Hebrew Text of Exodus VIII 19 [English 23]: An Emendation,” *VT* 24 (1974):489-492.

⁹ “seen” supplied

¹⁰ Literally, “and there came a”

¹¹ The word is *kabed*, which means “heavy, severe.” Driver suggests using “heavy,” since it combines both numerous (12:38) and severe (9:3, 18, 24). “Dense” or “thick” would also capture the idea.

¹² Here, and in the next phrase, the word “house” has to be taken as an adverbial accusative of termination.

¹³ Text has singular

¹⁴ Or, “officials”

¹⁵ The text simply has “and in all the land of Egypt.” Driver suggests reading with the LXX, SP, and Peshitta; this would call for adding a conjunction before the last

swarms of flies.

8:25 Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God in the land.”¹⁷ **8:26** But Moses said, “That would not be the right thing to do,¹⁸ for the sacrifices we make¹⁹ to Yahweh our God would be an abomination²⁰ to the Egyptians.²¹ And if we make sacrifices

clause to make it read, “into the house of Pharaoh, and into his servants houses, and into all the land of Egypt; **and** the land was . . .” (p. 68).

¹⁶ *tishshakhet* is a strong word; it is the *niphal* imperfect of *shakhat*, and is translated “ruined.” If the classification as imperfect stands, then it would have to be something like a customary imperfect (the land was being ruined); otherwise, it may simply be a preterite without the *waw* consecutive. Cassuto wonders if some of this material is not from an ancient poem in which such forms would be natural. Be that as it may, the verb describes utter devastation. This is the verb that is used in Genesis 13 to describe how Yahweh destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Swarms of flies would disrupt life, contaminate life, and bring disease.

¹⁷ After the plague is inflicted on the land, then Pharaoh makes an appeal. So there is the familiar confrontation (vv. 25-29). Pharaoh’s words to Moses are an advancement on his previous words. Now he uses imperatives: “Go, sacrifice to your God.” But he restricts it to “in the land.” This is a subtle attempt to keep them as a subjugated people and prevent their absolute allegiance to their God. This offered compromise would destroy the point of the exodus--to leave Egypt and find a new allegiance under Yahweh God.

¹⁸ The clause is a little unusual in its formation. The form *nakon* is the *niphal* participle from *kun*, which usually means “firm, fixed, steadfast,” but here it has a rare meaning of “right, fitting, appropriate.” It functions in the sentence as the predicate adjective, because the infinitive *la’asot* is the subject--“to do thus [that] is not right.”

¹⁹ This translation has been smoothed out to capture the sense. The text literally says, “we sacrifice the abominations of the Egyptians to Yahweh our God.” In other words, the animals that Israel would sacrifice were sacred to Egypt, and their sacrificing them would have been an abomination to the Egyptians.

²⁰ An “abomination” is something that is off-limits, something that is tabu. It could be translated “detestable, loathsome.”

²¹ Cassuto says there are two ways to understand “the abominations of the Egyptians.” One is that the sacrifice of the sacred animals would appear an abominable thing in the eyes of the Egyptians; and the other is that the word “abomination” could be a derogatory term for idols--we sacrifice the Egyptian idols (especially if they worship the bull). So that is why he says if they did this the Egyptians would stone them (p. 109).

that are an abomination in the eyes of the Egyptians,²² will they not stone us?²³ **8:27** We must go²⁴ on a three day journey²⁵ into the desert and sacrifice²⁶ to Yahweh our God, just as He is telling us.”²⁷

8:28 And Pharaoh said, “I will release you²⁸ that you may sacrifice²⁹ to Yahweh your God in the desert, but you must not go very far.³⁰ Only³¹ pray for me.”

8:29 And Moses said, “I am going to go out³² from you, and then I will

²² Literally, “if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before them”

²³ The interrogative clause has no particle to indicate it is a question, but it is connected with the conjunction to the preceding clause, and the meaning of these clauses indicate it is a question (GKC, par. 150a).

²⁴ The verb *nelek* is a *qal* imperfect of the verb *halak*. Here it should be given the modal nuance of obligation: “we must go.”

²⁵ This clause is placed first in the sentence to stress the distance required. *derek* is an adverbial accusative specifying how far they must go. It is in construct, so “three days” modifies it. It is a “journey of three days,” or, “a three day journey.”

²⁶ The form is the perfect tense with a *waw* consecutive; it follows in the sequence: we must go . . . and then [must] sacrifice.”

²⁷ The form is the imperfect tense. It could be future—“as he will say to us”; but it also could be the progressive imperfect if this is now what God is telling them to do—“as he is saying to us.”

²⁸ By changing from “the people” to “you” the speech of the Pharaoh was becoming more personal.

²⁹ This form, a perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive, is equivalent to the imperfect tense that precedes it. However, it must be subordinate to the preceding verb to express the purpose. He is not saying “I will release . . . and you will sacrifice,” but rather “I will release . . .that you may sacrifice” or even “to sacrifice.”

³⁰ The construction is very emphatic. First, it uses a verbal hendiadys with a *hiphil* imperfect and the *qal* infinitive construct: *lo’ tarkhiqu laleket*, “you shall not make far to go” meaning, “you shall not go far.” But this prohibition is then emphasized with the additional infinitive absolute *harkheq*—“you shall in no wise go too far.” The point is very strong to safeguard the concession.

³¹ “Only” is added

³² The deictic particle with the particle usually indicates the *futur instans* nuance: I

pray to Yahweh, and the swarms of flies will depart from Pharaoh and from his servants and from his people tomorrow. Only let not Pharaoh play false again³³ by not releasing³⁴ the people to sacrifice to Yahweh.” **8:30** So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to Yahweh. **8:31** And Yahweh did according to the word of Moses, and He removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh and from his servants and from his people. Not one remained. **8:32** But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not release the people.

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

The announcement of the plague parallels the first plague’s announcement (8:20-23). Moses and Aaron meet Pharaoh again to warn him about refusing to send out the people. The play on “send” stresses the talionic justice: “if you do not send out my people,” then “I am about to send the flies.”

Egypt has always suffered from flies of one sort or another from the marshy lands. They are obstinately persistent in tormenting both men and animals. They particularly delight in fastening upon the corners of the eyes and eyelids. In the summer they are extremely annoying so that screens have to be used at night and fans by day. Herodotus mentions the flies and describes the nets with which the people protected themselves. If the plague took place in the winter, Pharaoh may have thought that the threat was unlikely. But the degree of the affliction described here appears to be greater than a normal summer’s pestilence.

At the heart of the plague, however, is the protection afforded to Israel. God makes a distinction or severance in the land of Goshen. The

am about to . . . , or I am going to The clause could also be subordinated as a temporal clause.

³³ The verb *talal* means “to mock, deceive, trifle with.” The construction in this verse forms a verbal hendiadys again: the *hiphil* jussive *’al-yosep* , “let not [Pharaoh] add,” is joined with the *hiphil* infinitive of the main verb, *hatel*, “to deceive.” It means: “Let not Pharaoh deceive again.” Changing to the third person in this warning to Pharaoh is more decisive, more powerful.

³⁴ The *piel* infinitive construct after *lamed* (and the negative) functions expegetically, explaining how Pharaoh would deal falsely—“by not releasing.”

term (unless changed to “to sever”), signifies “redemption” (literal rendering: “I have set redemption” between you and them). Israel is spared from the flies.

After the miracle is worked (8:24), there is the familiar confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh (8:25-29). Pharaoh’s words (25[21]) to Moses are an advancement on previous words: “go, serve”—now using imperatives. But his instructions are qualified by “in the land,” which is a subtle attempt to restrict their obedience to the call and keep them as his subjects. This suggested compromise destroys the point of the exodus which was that Israel leave the land of Egypt and serve the LORD their God (not Pharaoh) in a new allegiance.

Moses’ response (26,27 [22,23]) shows that he perceives fully what was at stake. It is not fitting for them to stay in the land. To sacrifice in Egypt, he reasons, would be an abomination to the Egyptians who would stone them. The point is, I think, that the religious system of Israel would be incompatible with the Egyptians’. Everyone knew it. Moses is simply pointing it out to Pharaoh. Whatever sacrificing that was done in this pagan land would not have had the same purpose that Israel’s would. Israel’s sacrificing to the LORD would be the beginning of their total allegiance to the LORD. Moses knows that the call is to leave the land and go three days into the wilderness. His reasoning with Pharaoh puts the onus on Egypt.

Pharaoh’s limitations on Israel (“go not far”) prompt a stern warning from Moses: “Let not Pharaoh trifle”—the same term used of used of Elijah’s mockery of the beliefs of the priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18. Israel has a call, but Pharaoh has yet to take it seriously.

The final part of this section records the outcome of the plague (30-32 [26-28]). Moses entreated the LORD, the LORD did according to the prayer, and Pharaoh hardened his heart.

The main idea that I would develop with this plague (within the development of the sequence of plagues) is that now we learn that God can inflict suffering on some and preserve others. In his bringing the affliction on the Egyptians, he is showing the coming judgment that will release his people to sacrifice and worship. In sparing the Israelites from this plague he is anticipating the redemption that will be granted to them. Then Pharaoh will take things seriously. God is fully able to keep the

dog-fly in the land of the Egyptians, and eventually bring his own people completely out of the land of the Egyptians.