

# UNIT 15: THE FIFTH BLOW THE PLAGUE OF DISEASE (Exodus 9:1-7)

## INTRODUCTION <sup>1</sup>

### Text and Textual Notes

**9:1** Then Yahweh said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and tell him, ‘Thus says Yahweh the God of the Hebrews, “Release my people that they may serve me. **9:2** For if you refuse to release them,<sup>2</sup> and continue holding them,<sup>3</sup> **9:3** then the hand of Yahweh will surely bring<sup>4</sup> a very

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<sup>1</sup> This plague demonstrates that Yahweh has power over the livestock of Egypt. He is able to strike the animals with disease and death, thus delivering a blow to the economical as well as religious life of the land. By the former plagues many of the Egyptian religious ceremonies would have been interrupted and objects of veneration defiled or destroyed. Now some of the important deities will be attacked. In Goshen, where the cattle are merely cattle, no disease hits; but in Egypt it is a different matter. Osiris, the savior, cannot even save the brute in which his own soul is supposed to dwell. Apis and Mnevis, the ram of Ammon, the sheep of Sais, and the goat of Mendes, perish together. Hence, Moses reminds Israel afterwards, “Upon their gods also Yahweh executed judgments” (Num. 33:4). And Jethro, when he heard of all these events, said, “Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all gods; for in the thing wherein they dealt proudly, He was above them (18:11).

<sup>2</sup> “them” is added

<sup>3</sup> ‘*od*, a simple adverb meaning “yet, still,” can be inflected with suffixes and used as a predicator of existence, with the nuance “to still be, yet be” (T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, par. 137). Then, it is joined here with the *hiphil* participle *makhaziq*, to form the sentence “you are still holding them.”

<sup>4</sup> The form of the verb used here is *hoyah*, the *qal* active participle, fsg, from the verb “to be.” This is the only place in the Old Testament that this form occurs. Ogden shows that this form is appropriate with the particle *hinneh* to stress impending divine action, and that it conforms to the pattern in these narratives where five times the participle is used in the impending threat to Pharaoh (7:17; 8:2; 9:3, 14; 10:4). See G. S. Ogden, “Notes on the Use of הוּיָהּ in Exodus IX. 3,” *VT* 17 (1967):483-484.

terrible plague<sup>5</sup> on your livestock that is in the field, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels,<sup>6</sup> on the herd and on the flock. **9:4** And Yahweh will put a division<sup>7</sup> between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, and nothing<sup>8</sup> will die of all that the Israelites have.<sup>9</sup>

**9:5** Yahweh set<sup>10</sup> an appointed time, saying, “Tomorrow Yahweh will do this<sup>11</sup> in the land.” **9:6** And Yahweh did it<sup>12</sup> on the next day;<sup>13</sup> and all<sup>14</sup> the livestock of Egypt died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not one died **9:7** And Pharaoh sent to see,<sup>15</sup> and indeed, none<sup>16</sup> of the livestock

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<sup>5</sup> The word *deber* is usually translated “pestilence” when it applies to diseases for humans. It is used only here and in Psalm 78:50 for animals.

<sup>6</sup> The old liberal view that camels were not domesticated at this time (Driver, p. 70, Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 96, et. al.) has indeed been corrected by more recently uncovered information (see Kenneth Kitchen, “Camel” in *NBD*).

<sup>7</sup> See comments on 8:22,23

<sup>8</sup> Cassuto observes that there is a word play in this section. A pestilence—*deber*—will fall on Egypt’s cattle, but no thing —*dabar*— *belonging* to Israel would die. He suggests that it was for this reason that the verb was changed in verse one from “say” to “speak” (*dibber*). See Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> The *lamed* preposition indicates possession: “all that was to the Israelites” means “all that the Israelites had.”

<sup>10</sup> Literally, “and Yahweh set”

<sup>11</sup> Literally, “this thing”

<sup>12</sup> Literally, “this thing”

<sup>13</sup> Literally, “on the morrow”

<sup>14</sup> The word “all” clearly does not mean “all” in the exclusive, literal sense, because in subsequent plagues there are cattle. The word must denote such a large number that whatever was left was insignificant for the economy. It could also be taken to mean “all [kinds of] livestock died.”

<sup>15</sup> “to see” added

<sup>16</sup> Literally, not so much as one was dead”

of Israel had died. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened,<sup>17</sup> and he did not release the people.

## EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

This plague demonstrates that the LORD has power over the livestock of Egypt. He is able to strike the animals with disease and death, thus ruining the economy of the land as well as the religious ideas of the people.

By the former plagues many of the Egyptians' religious ceremonies had been interrupted and objects of veneration defiled and destroyed. Now some of their chief deities will be attacked. In Goshen, where the animals were merely cattle, the plague does not extend. But in Egypt the matter is different. Osiris, the savior god, cannot even save the brute in which his own soul is supposed to dwell. Apis and Mnevis, the ram of Ammon, the sheep of Sais, and the goat of Mendes, perish together. Hence Moses reminds Israel afterwards, "Upon their gods also the LORD executed judgments" (Num. 33:4); and Jethro, when he heard from Moses the account of these events, said, "Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; for in the thing wherein they dealt proudly, he was above them" (18:11).

The announcement of the plague is based on a warning against Pharaoh's refusal. The regular beginning calls for Moses and Aaron to go and demand that the king release Israel. "If you refuse," they declare, "and hold them still," then the plague of disease will come. It is interesting to note how the verb *khazaq* is being used in these passages. It describes the "mighty" hand of the LORD that will bring the people out of Egypt, the "hard" heart of the king who refuses, and now the "holding" of the people in bondage. God's mighty hand, however, will overwhelm the stubborn resistance of Pharaoh.

That hand is specifically the subject of the bringing of the plague. "The hand of the LORD" is upon the cattle. Throughout the Bible it is clear

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<sup>17</sup> The verb form here is *wayyikbad*, emphasizing that Pharaoh was stubborn or unyielding.

that everything is in the power of God, but when his hand is upon or against something, then devastation will follow. Here it will be a grievous pestilence. Here too the LORD severs the cattle of Israel so that they will not die. Finally, the LORD sets the time that this will happen.

The plague is described very simply, The LORD did this thing. As a result of the plague, “all the cattle of Egypt died.” “All” here may be interpreted in one of three ways. It may be fully literal, in which case there will be problems with subsequent passages in which the Egyptians still have cattle (which would require saying they went and got more). It may be taken as a synecdoche, meaning that most of the cattle of Egypt died (as in “all Israel” went to fight the Amalekites). Or, it could mean that every kind of cattle was struck with the plague. The second one may be the easiest to support. But we cannot be dogmatic about the verse. Whatever the interpretation might be, the point is very clear: God was ruining all the livestock, and in so doing was bringing death a little closer to the life of Egypt. Eventually people also will die. This is but a warning of the price of refusing God. The Bible shows time and time again how those who stubbornly refuse to obey God and in the process cause great difficulty for the righteous will eventually be punished, and certainly could be cut off without remedy.

The effect of the plague on Pharaoh is the same as before. He sent to see if the animals of Goshen were hit (none were dead), but hardened his heart still and did not release Israel. More severe plagues would be needed to destroy this stubborn ruler.