

UNIT 20: THE TENTH BLOW THE PLAGUE OF DEATH (Exodus 11:1-10)

INTRODUCTION

Text and Textual Notes ¹

11:1 And Yahweh said to Moses, “I will bring one more² plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after this he will release you from this place. When he releases you,³ “he will drive you out completely⁴ from this place.” **11:2** Speak now in

¹ The last plague is the most severe; it is that for which all the others were preliminary warnings. Up to this point Yahweh had been showing His power to destroy Pharaoh, and now He would begin to do so by bringing death to the Egyptians, a death that would fulfill the warning of talionic judgment--“let my son go, or I will kill your son.”

The passage records the announcement of the judgment first to Moses and then through Moses to Pharaoh. The first two verses record the word of God to Moses. This is followed by a parenthetical note how God had elevated Moses and Israel in the eye of Egypt (v. 3). Then there is the announcement to Pharaoh (vv. 4-8). This is followed by a parenthetical note on how God had hardened Pharaoh so that Yahweh would be elevated over him.

It is somewhat problematic here that Moses does appear before Pharaoh again. On the one hand, given the nature of Pharaoh to blow hot and cold, to change his mind, it is not impossible for another meeting to have occurred. But Moses said he would not do it. So there are some solutions. One solution some take is to say that the warning in 10:28 originally stood after this chapter. A change like that is unwarranted, and without support. If a smooth translation is required that would not have a subsequent meeting, then verses 1-3 could be parenthetical, and put into the past perfect translation--Yahweh had said to Moses--so that verse 4 follows immediately upon 10:29 in the chronology.

² “more” added from context

³ The expression *k^eshall^ekho kalah* is difficult. It seems to say, “as/when he releases [you] altogether.” The LXX has “and when he sends you forth with everything.” Onkelos and modern translators made *kalah* adverbial, “completely” or “altogether.” Childs follows an emendation to read, “as one sends away a bride” (p. 130). Kaiser prefers the view of Yaron that would render it “in the manner of one’s sending away a *kallah* [a slave purchased to be one’s daughter-in-law]” (p. 370). The last two readings

the ears⁵ of the people, and let each man ask⁶ from his neighbor, and each woman from her neighbor,⁷ articles of silver and articles of gold.”⁸

11:3 And Yahweh gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Moreover, the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people.⁹

11:4 And Moses said, “Thus says Yahweh, ‘About midnight¹⁰ I will go out into the midst of Egypt, **11:5** and all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first born of Pharaoh¹¹ who sits on his throne, to the firstborn son of the slave

call for revising the vocalization and introducing a rare word into the narrative meaning. The simplest approach at the moment is to follow a meaning “when he releases [you] altogether,” i.e., with all your little ones and your livestock.

⁴ The words are emphatic: *garesh y^egaresh*. The *piel* verb means “to drive out, expel.” With the infinitive absolute it says that Pharaoh “will drive you out completely.” He will be glad to be rid of you--it will be a total expulsion.

⁵ The expression is emphatic; it seeks to ensure that the Israelites hear the instruction.

⁶ The verb “ask” is *w^eyish’alu*, the *qal* jussive, “let them ask.” This is the point introduced in 3:22. The meaning of the verb might be stronger than simply “ask”; it might have something of the idea of “implore” (see also its use in the naming of Samuel, who was “asked” from Yahweh [1 Sam. 1:20]).

⁷ The “plundering” actually takes place on the night of Passover. The neighbors are glad to see them go (12:33) and so willingly give their jewelry and vessels.

⁸ See David Skinner, “Some Major Themes of Exodus,” *Mid-America ThJ* 1 (1977):31-42.

⁹ The presence of this clause indicates why the Egyptians gave rather willingly to the Israelites: because of his miracles and his power with Pharaoh, Moses was great in stature--powerful and influential.

¹⁰ Literally, “about the middle of the night”

¹¹ The firstborn in these cultures is rather significant; but the firstborn of Pharaoh is most important. Pharaoh was considered a god, the son of Re, the sun god, for the specific purpose of ruling over Re’s chief concern, the land of Egypt. For the purpose of re-creation, the supreme god assumed the form of the living king and gave seed which was to become the next king and the next “son of Re.”

Moreover, the Pharaoh was the incarnation of the god Horus, a falcon god whose

girl who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle. **11:6** And there shall be a great cry in all the land of Egypt, as there has never been,¹² nor ever shall be again.¹³ **11:7** But against any of the Israelites, not even a dog will move its tongue,¹⁴ against people or against animals,¹⁵ that you might know that Yahweh makes a distinction¹⁶ between Egypt and Israel.’ **11:8** And all these your servants will come down to me and bow down¹⁷ to me, saying, ‘Go, you and all the people who follow¹⁸ you’; and after that I will go out.” And he went out from Pharaoh in great anger.

11:9 And Yahweh said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders¹⁹ might be multiplied in the land of Egypt”

provenance was the heavens. Horus represented the living king who succeeded the dead king Osiris. Every living king was Horus; every dead king Osiris (see J. A. Wilson, “Egypt,” in *Before Philosophy*, ed. By Henri Frankfort, et al, pp. 83ff.).

To strike the firstborn son of Pharaoh was to destroy this cardinal doctrine of the divine kingship of Egypt. And to strike any firstborn was to destroy the heir, the hopes and aspirations, of the Egyptians. Such a blow would be enough for Pharaoh, for then he would drive them out.

¹² Literally, “which like it there has never been”

¹³ Literally, “and like it it will not add”

¹⁴ The expression is unusual in this context, but it must indicate that not only would no harm come to the Israelites, but that no unfriendly sound would come against them either--not even so much as a dog barking (literally, “not a dog will sharpen his tongue”). It is possible this is to be related to the watch dog (see F. C. Fensham, “Remarks on Keret 114^b--136^a,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 11 [1983]:75).

¹⁵ Literally, “against man or beast”

¹⁶ See 8:22, 9:4.

¹⁷ Moses’ anger is expressed forcefully here. As B. Jacob says, “He had appeared before Pharaoh a dozen times either as God’s emissary or when summoned by Pharaoh, but he would not come again; now they would have to search him out if they needed help” (pp. 289,290)

¹⁸ Literally, “that are at your feet”

¹⁹ The verse is essentially the same as 7:3,4; but the wonders, or portents, here would refer to what is yet to be done in Egypt.

11:10 So Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh; but Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not release the Israelites from his land.

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

The last plague is the most severe; it is that for which all the others were designed. Up to this point the LORD had been showing his power to destroy Pharaoh, and now he would begin to do so by bringing death to the Egyptians, a death that would fulfill the promise of *talionic* judgment--son for son.

The passage records the announcement of this judgment first to Moses and then through Moses to Pharaoh. The first two verses record the LORD's announcement of the final plague. This is followed by a parenthetical notion how God had elevated Moses and Israel in the eye of Egypt (v. 3). The next section, verses 4-8, record Moses' announcement of the plague to Pharaoh. This is followed by a parenthetical note on how God had hardened Pharaoh throughout so that the LORD would be elevated before him. So the structure could follow these four sections, but could also be organized in two. I prefer the two.

First, the LORD announces the last plague and instructs Israel to prepare for it by taking the spoil of Egypt--an act made possible by the LORD's revelation of them in the estimation of Egypt (1-3). At this point nothing of the nature of the plague is mentioned except that it is the final one and that Pharaoh will drive them out after it.

One problem to be dealt with in this section is the meaning of *sha'al*, "to ask," but here traditionally translated "borrow." The problem is similar to that of the word's usage in the naming of Samuel (1 Sam. 1). Perhaps the idea is a more intensive, "implore" (see A. H. Van Zyl, "The Meaning of the Name Samuel" in *Biblical Essay* [Proceedings of the 12th Meeting of Die Ou-Testamentiese Werkgenenskap in Suid-Afrika], pp. 122-29).

After the instructions to implore wealth from the Egyptians, the narrative inserts an explanation of their success--the LORD gave them favor.

In the second part of the passage we have Moses' announcement of the judgment on the first born (4-8) and an explanatory note of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart to ensure this judgment (9, 10). The key study in this section is the significance of "firstborn." It the word was studied when first used in the book,

then here there need only be correlation.

The firstborn of Pharaoh is rather significant in Egyptian culture. Pharaoh was considered a god, the son of *Re*, the sun god, for the specific purpose of ruling *Re's* chief concern, the land of Egypt. The Egyptian stated repeatedly that the king was the physical son who issued from *Re*. For purposes of procreation the supreme god assumed the form of the living king and gave the seed which was to become the "Son of *Re*."

Moreover, Pharaoh was the incorporation of the god *Horus*, a falcon whose divine province was the heavens. *Horus* represented the living king who succeeded the dead king, *Osiris*. Every living king was *Horus* ; every dead king *Osiris* (J. A. Wilson, "Egypt," in *Before Philosophy*, Henri Frankfort, et. al., pp. 83ff.).

To strike the firstborn son of Pharaoh was to destroy this cardinal doctrine of the divine kingship of Egypt. And to strike any firstborn was to destroy the heir, the hopes and aspirations, of the Egyptians. Such a blow would be enough for Pharaoh, for then they would drive them out.

The passage would be developed in a way similar to the preceding accounts, i.e., God will bring severe judgment on the wicked in order to deliver his people. Israel would learn that life and death was in the hand of God, and that the oppressors who had so readily inflicted death of Israel's "sons," Israel--the firstborn son of the LORD, would find death in their dwellings. Those who treat the seed of Abraham lightly God must curse, and that curse is death. But before the oppressors are destroyed, God brings his people to plunder them of their wealth.

There is little that is parallel to this in an everyday experience for the church. We know that this announcement is the first part of the passover event, and that that whole event is typological for the death of Christ. According to Paul, he is the passover, the firstborn of creation. He dies “in that night” so that those who “apply the blood” may escape death triumphantly. So one could look at this passage as part of that whole drama and discuss the great deliverance we enjoy at the expense of the life of another son. The imagery of plundering would then serve to heighten the concept of the victory we have, sharing, as it were, in the booty, the spiritual gifts dispersed by the conquering Savior.

But the Scripture also talks of our final deliverance “when he again brings in the firstborn into the world” (Heb. 1:5). At that time the LORD will judge the world in order to deliver the redeemed to establish a new order, a genuine theocracy.

In such eschatological events as Israel, in this passage, and we, now, look forward to, faith in the sovereign LORD enables the righteous to expect the deliverance and prepare for it.