

Exodus 4. 29 to 11. 10, Nassau. April 2013.

We are now more or less reached the end of April. You may or may not realize it, but the beginning of this month marked the close of this year's Jewish Festival of the Passover.¹ As you are well aware, that Festival – or, to give it its biblical title, that 'Feast'² – commemorates the time when the ancient Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt following the last of ten plagues which God visited on the Pharaoh of the day and his people.³

This evening, I want to look with you, not at that ... the last (and doubtless the most well-known) of the plagues ... but at the nine plagues which preceded it.

And I hardly need spend much time on the background! Suffice it to say that the descendants of Jacob ... 'the children of Israel' ... had suffered oppression by the Egyptians for many years – in all likelihood over 400 years.⁴

At the outset, this oppression by the then-Pharaoh and the Egyptians⁵ had been triggered largely by fear ... fear that the children of Israel (a people group which had entered Egypt many years before⁶ as no more than a family numbering about seventy,⁷ plus their household servants, but which, over the years, had grown until they now formed a sizeable clan numbering in excess of two million people, over 600,000 of whom were able bodied men⁸) ... this oppression had been triggered largely, I say, by fear that they (the children of Israel) might rebel against the ruling authority in Egypt.⁹ And so, driven largely by fear of an uprising in time of war,¹⁰ the then-Pharaoh had resorted to oppression¹¹ ... bringing into bondage those who, as the descendants of Abraham, were not only the people of Israel, but were the people of God.¹²

The response of God – who observed the affliction of His people, heard their cry, and knew their sorrows¹³ – the response of God was to raise up¹⁴ the man Moses as their future deliverer ... a man who He (the Lord) had specially preserved and prepared¹⁵ for the huge task before him.

At the so-called burning bush,¹⁶ Moses received his daunting commission from God,¹⁷ and there, following numerous objections¹⁸ – each of which was met and overridden by the Lord, he – Moses – (rather reluctantly) accepted the charge which God had given him,¹⁹ being reassured in part by the knowledge that he was to be joined by his older brother Aaron.²⁰

But initially the case which the two brothers submitted to the new Pharaoh²¹ – possibly Amenhotep the Second²² – who continued the policy of oppression, fell on deaf ears – indeed, it served only to make matters worse than before²³ in that Pharaoh's response was to increase his demands on the Israelites, requiring in future the same productivity, but without providing them with one of the essential materials necessary for performing their allotted task.²⁴ Needless to say, the Israelite foremen – who would be held responsible for any failure to deliver the set quota of bricks²⁵ – were not amused. And, as you might expect, Moses was not slow to voice his disappointment – and complaint – to the Lord.

And it is from there that we take up the story, with our first reading for this evening ... from Exodus 5 verse 22 ...

Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Why is it you have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people; neither have you delivered your people at all'.

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh. For with a strong hand he will let them go, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land'.

Now down to verse 5 of chapter 6 ...

I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the Lord; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians ... and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

And then in chapter 7, verse 1 ...

So the Lord said to Moses: '... Aaron your brother shall speak to Pharaoh to send the children of Israel out of his land. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay my hand on Egypt and bring my armies and my people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments'.

At which point, as recorded in verses 8 to 13, Moses was equipped with the power to perform a miracle – that of turning Aaron’s rod (or ‘staff’) into a serpent – to back up and accredit his message to Pharaoh ...

And it was Pharaoh’s refusal – in spite of the miracle-sign – it was his refusal to grant God’s demand that he (Pharaoh) let Israel go ... which led directly to the first of the plague-judgements which were to fall on him and on his people ... details of which plague-judgement are recorded in verses 14 to 21 ...

So the Lord said to Moses: ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hard; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, when he goes out to the water. And you shall stand by the river’s bank to meet him; and the rod which was turned to a serpent you shall take in your hand. And you shall say to him, “The Lord God of the Hebrews has sent me to you, saying, ‘Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness’; but indeed, until now you would not hear! ...”’.

... verse 19 ...

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron, “Take your rod and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their streams, over their rivers, over their ponds, and over all their pools of water, that they may become blood”. And there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt ... ’.

And Moses and Aaron did so, just as the Lord commanded ... And all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. The fish that were in the river died, the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink the water of the river. So there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.

Now into chapter 9 verse 14 – the Lord’s word to Pharaoh ...

For at this time I will send all my plagues to your very heart, and on your servants and on your people, that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.

... then verse 16 ...

For this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show my power in you, and that my name may be declared in all the earth.

Now chapter 10, verse 1 ...

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine before him ... ’.

And, finally, to the song of Moses in chapter 15 ... just verses 6 and 11 ...

Your right hand, O Lord, has become glorious in power ... Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?

As I said earlier, I wish to focus this evening, not on all the so-called ‘Ten Plagues’, but on the nine plagues which preceded the Passover and the Exodus.

As you know, the tenth and final plague stands separate and distinct from the previous nine. And this for at least three reasons ... (i) first, in that, although God had spoken earlier in general terms of the forthcoming plagues,²⁶ only the tenth plague (the death of Egypt’s firstborn) was explicitly foretold by God to Moses before the series of plagues began;²⁷ (ii) second, in that it alone was to prove effective in securing Israel’s release from Egypt – albeit in Pharaoh’s eyes at the time that release amounted to no more than Israel’s freedom to keep a short feast to the Lord in the wilderness²⁸ - and (iii) third, in that, alone of the plagues, the death of the firstborn in Egypt took place on a clearly specified time and date.²⁹

Of our nine plagues, you might say that the first and the last function as bookends, in that they, unlike the seven which fall between, were marked by set periods of time – namely, seven days³⁰ and three days³¹ respectively.

There are several clear indications in the Bible text that the nine plagues break down conveniently into three sets of three plagues apiece. For example, the first three are distinguished by the use of Aaron’s staff as an instrument,³² the last three by the use of Moses’s staff,³³ and the central three by the absence of either staff.

Again, in the case of the first plague in each set of three, Moses was directed by God to meet Pharaoh early in the morning down by the river and to give him advance warning of the plague³⁴ ... in the case of the second plague in each group Moses was directed by God to ‘go in to Pharaoh’ – presumably into his court – to give him advance warning of the plague³⁵ ... whereas in the case of the last plague in each group the plague came without any warning. On all occasions when Moses did give Pharaoh warning of a coming plague, he (Moses) first relayed the

message to him, 'Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, that they may serve me', thereby giving the king ample opportunity to avoid the plague about to be announced.

Generally speaking, the three waves of plagues came with increasing force and intensity.

Each of the first three plagues (the blood, the frogs and the lice) were certainly unpleasant and inconvenient – to say the least – but none of them involved any great material loss or suffering to either man or beast.

The second cluster of plagues (the flies, the livestock disease and the boils) did much more harm – each resulting either in loss to property (in the form of the Egyptians' cattle) or in pain – whether from the ulcers erupting or from the bites of bloodsucking insects and the infamous scarab beetle ... for I note the description of this plague given by Asaph in Psalm 78, 'He sent swarms among them, which devoured them (which ate them – which preyed on them).³⁶ Sounds nasty!

But the third set of plagues (the hail, locusts and eerie darkness) were even more severe – resulting in the wholesale destruction of the Egyptians' animals and crops – bringing the economy of Egypt to its knees³⁷ – and occasioning the death of not a few Egyptian servants.³⁸ The Lord had warned Pharaoh in connection with both the plague of locusts, and the plague of the hail and its attendant electrical storm that these plagues would be exceptional – the like of which had not been heard of since the founding of Egypt.³⁹

Given the marked increasing severity of the plagues it comes as no surprise to find that God's people were subjected to only the milder plagues of the first group. The Lord made it abundantly clear to Pharaoh and to all that, beginning with the fourth plague (that of the devouring flies), they (Israel – dwelling separately in the land of Goshen) ... that they would be exempt from the more serious effects of the later plagues⁴⁰ – and this because He (the Lord) 'put a division' (literally 'a redemption') between His people and Pharaoh's people.⁴¹

Hardly a coincidence! And this clear distinction served, not only to shelter Israel from the effects of the worst and most fearful of the plagues,⁴² but to identify who it was that was responsible for those plagues.⁴³ The first three plagues had demonstrated that a supernatural – and indeed, a superior⁴⁴ – power was at work. But it was not until Israel was spared the effects of the later plagues in a remarkable way that it was proven beyond any doubt whose power was responsible for these judgments – that it was the power of Him who was, as He often identified Himself to Pharaoh, 'the Lord God of the Hebrews'.⁴⁵

I emphasised that 'Israel was spared the effects of the later plagues *in a remarkable way*' for the simple reason that, for instance, you wouldn't normally expect swarming insects to pay much attention to geographical boundaries!⁴⁶ And I note that, after the swarming insects had been removed from Egypt in response to the prayer of Moses⁴⁷ – and when 'there remained not one' there⁴⁸ – it would have been simply impossible for Pharaoh to check back whether the land of Goshen had been treated any differently. And so it was that following the next plague (that of the livestock disease) he was quick to send his servants to establish whether or not 'the cattle of the Israelites had been affected – which they hadn't – 'not so much as one of them!⁴⁹ After all, even Pharaoh could tell the difference between a dead cow and a live one. And, as an aside, you might like to note that Moses was later insistent that, when Israel would leave Egypt, 'not a hoof' would be left behind⁵⁰ ... which is why we find further on that, when they did leave, they had 'very many cattle'⁵¹ – which is probably more than many of the Egyptians did!⁵²

Another interesting feature of the breakdown of the nine plagues is that, in the two groups where the Israelites are distinguished from the Egyptians, the first two plagues are set apart in each case by the way in which the Lord volunteered the day of their arrival – in each case, 'tomorrow'⁵³ – thereby providing Pharaoh with still further evidence that these plagues were not only supernatural,⁵⁴ but that they came from the Lord who specified the exact day they would come.

But as the severity of the plagues increased, so too did Pharaoh's desire to secure the intervention of Moses and Aaron to remove them.

And we can well understand why. Because Pharaoh was, in fact, in a very vulnerable position.

For, as Pharaoh, he was thought by his people to be descended from the gods – carrying among many others the title 'Son of Ra' (or Rē) – the sun-god. As the representative of the gods it was his responsibility to maintain the order which it was believed to have been established at creation, and to protect his people.⁵⁵ They, his people, believed that, if the then Pharaoh was indeed divinely chosen, they would enjoy times of peace and plenty, the swelling Nile would fill their land with crops, and their herds would increase. But, as we know, the plagues polluted the Nile, destroyed the crops, and killed the cattle. You will understand therefore that this Pharaoh was batting on a rather sticky wicket.

And faced with pressure from the plagues, he was not only prepared to confess to having sinned against the Lord and against His servants,⁵⁶ but, as he had not done during the first group of judgements he offered various concessions and forms of compromise.

Retreating from his original absolute refusal to let Israel go to keep a feast to the Lord,⁵⁷ *during* the *fourth* plague (that of the flies) Pharaoh raised the question *where* Israel were to go, proposing that they sacrifice to the Lord 'in the land'.⁵⁸ And, when Moses objected that this would be an abomination in the eyes of Pharaoh's own people,⁵⁹ he (Pharaoh) agreed to let Israel go, but on the proviso that they went 'not very far away'.⁶⁰

Then, *before* the eighth plague (that of the locusts), Pharaoh raised the question, not *where* Israel were to go, but *who of them* were to go, having it in mind that only the menfolk go, leaving their families behind.⁶¹ And I note that, as evidence that the intensifying plagues were beginning to have their effect upon Pharaoh and his court officials, they, for their part, for the very first time attempt to exert some influence (some sensible influence) on Pharaoh,⁶² and he, for his part, was prepared to consider a compromise *before* the threatened plague even began to fall⁶³ on his land.⁶⁴

Pharaoh's final proposed concession came, neither *during* nor *before* a plague, but *following* one (the ninth, that of the darkness), when he raised the question, not *where* Israel were to go, not *who of them* were to go, but *with what* they were to go ... insisting that, if all the Israelites must go, then they must leave behind their flocks and herds⁶⁵ – in all likelihood as his insurance that, in due course, they (the people of Israel) would return.

But by that time Moses was in no more mood than was Pharaoh to book another meeting!⁶⁶

A moment ago I referred to 'the ninth' plague, and that very expression raises the obvious question, 'Why were there these nine plagues at all?' ... given that the Lord had disclosed to Moses right back at the Bush that, if Pharaoh proved obstinate, He (the Lord) would slay Pharaoh's first born son⁶⁷ – which was to happen, we know, as part of the tenth and final sign.⁶⁸ Why then these nine previous plagues? Why did the Lord insist on (and I quote) '*multiplying* His signs and wonders in the land of Egypt'?⁶⁹

We will let the Lord Himself tell us. I am in chapter 9, verses 15 and 16 ...

'By now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, that you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.'

And, as the Lord said to His people back in chapter 6, 'I will deliver you from bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment ... and you shall know that I am the Lord your God ...'.⁷⁰ Note the words, 'with an outstretched arm'.

Some time ago, I came across the translation of one Egyptian inscription - celebrating the exploits of Pharaoh 'Men-Maat-Ré' during a military campaign in Northern Palestine - which reports, 'The desolation which the mighty arm of Pharaoh - to him be life, prosperity, health - the desolation which the mighty arm of Pharaoh made among the foe belonging to the Shasu (Bedouin shepherds)'.⁷¹

Clearly the Egyptians were accustomed to hearing of the outstretched arm of Pharaoh accomplishing mighty deeds. But here, in the early chapters of Exodus, we witness how God brought out His people by *His* outstretched arm and by 'great acts of judgement' as He described the plagues, and in so doing discredited once and for all the much-celebrated 'mighty arm of Pharaoh'!

And although it seems clear that the sovereign Lord chose now – as often – to employ some of His heavenly host to perform His bidding,⁷² in the judgement-plagues we are considering we witness something – just something⁷³ – of His own mighty power. And the many 'wonders' He performed in Egypt⁷⁴ must rank as probably the most dramatic demonstration of His power in the entire Old Testament ... echoing through the Law,⁷⁵ the Psalms,⁷⁶ and the Prophets⁷⁷ ... referred back to by the Lord Himself not long before the death of Joshua⁷⁸ ... and still spoken of by the Philistines⁷⁹ some 400 years later.

Why then ten plagues? Because, I suggest, if Pharaoh had capitulated after only one – or even two or three – God's power would not have been perceived as so striking and spectacular ... far less likely to have made the front page of the Canaan Chronicle or the Gath Gazette!⁸⁰

Earlier we read of God's claim that He had raised Pharaoh up onto the stage of history for the express purpose of showing His (the Lord's) power, and His visiting the series of ten plagues on Pharaoh formed an essential part of His doing so.

And it would therefore be unfair of me to skip over those verses scattered through our passage which refer to Pharaoh's heart being hardened – especially those verses which speak of his heart being hardened by God.

The facts are quite simple. Apart from those occasions when God spoke in advance of what was going to happen,⁸¹ the very first occasion where we read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart is in Exodus 9, following *the sixth* plague (that of the boils on man and beast).⁸² And it is most important that we note that, *prior to this*, we read on four occasions that 'Pharaoh's heart was hardened' ('Pharaoh's heart grew hard', that is)⁸³ and twice that 'he hardened his heart'.⁸⁴

That is, we are told of six separate occasions where Pharaoh is said in effect to have hardened his own heart before we ever read of God hardening his heart. I must emphasise that God is not said to have hardened Pharaoh's heart until after well over half the plagues were over, and then what God did was simply to confirm Pharaoh on his self-chosen path of wilful and stubborn resistance to God's repeated appeals on behalf of His people.⁸⁵

And I ought perhaps point out that Moses (and through him, the Lord) only ever asked Pharaoh to grant to Israel a short break from their labours that they might journey into the wilderness and there to 'serve' Him (the Lord), by keeping a feast and by offering sacrifices to Him⁸⁶... and this all the way through from before the plagues ever began⁸⁷ until after the ninth plague was over.⁸⁸

Indeed, even following the tenth and final plague (that of the death of the firstborn of Egypt) Pharaoh still spoke in terms of the people of Israel 'going out' and 'serving the Lord', now with his permission to take their flocks and herds with them ... in accordance with that which they had requested from the beginning.⁸⁹

And we can hardly miss the significance of the words at the beginning of chapter 14 ... 'When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was turned against the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go ... ?"⁹⁰

We know, of course, that the Lord had purposed from the very outset – before He ever spoke to Moses about Israel journeying into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to Him ... we know that He had purposed from the very beginning to deliver them fully and finally from their bondage in Egypt.⁹¹ But God was not being deceptive. He was deliberately confronting Pharaoh with a much lesser demand ... with a much more reasonable demand ... with a demand for something often granted by the kings of Egypt to others⁹² ... and He did this so as to expose Pharaoh's defiance and persistent hardness of heart for what it was.

Make no mistake, Pharaoh had every opportunity to submit to God's demand long before God hardened his heart. But having long and persistently resisted God's will, God's judgement on him was – in part – to confirm Pharaoh in his stubborn opposition. Pharaoh reached a point where, having fiercely refused to submit to God, God – who, in His great long-suffering, had borne patiently with Pharaoh until then ... where God saw fit to lock the already fast-closed door of Pharaoh's heart.

I said earlier that 'here ... in the first part of the book of Exodus we witness how God brought out His people by His outstretched arm and by 'great acts of judgement' ... and in so doing discredited ... the much-celebrated 'mighty arm of Pharaoh'!

Ah, but ... ah, but there was *more* to it than that.⁹³

For it is clear that, in manifesting the mighty power of God, the plagues discredited, not only Pharaoh and his so-called 'mighty arm', but discredited also many of the do-called 'gods' of Egypt ... demonstrating beyond question the supremacy of the God of Israel.⁹⁴

Not that Egypt were short of gods. I have read that scholars have identified some 2,000 names of gods and goddesses in Ancient Egypt – representing just about every living creature known to the Egyptians, and including not a few inanimate objects. But I have found that any study of these so-called deities is far from simple, and that there is often so much overlapping of the various names and titles that it just isn't possible to be dogmatic about many of the details.⁹⁵

Nevertheless, I suggest that the story runs roughly as follows ...

The first plague turned the River of Egypt – the Nile – into blood.⁹⁶

No doubt it was appropriate that the first plague-judgement fell there – given that this very River had once been the instrument of death to many helpless Hebrew babes, when it had, metaphorically, run red with the blood of these innocent little victims.⁹⁷

But more relevant still is the fact that the Nile was an object of worship as the symbol of the god Ha'pi. Ha'pi was the god of the yearly flooding of the Nile⁹⁸ and was known as the 'lord of the fish'.⁹⁹

So that, when 'all the water in the River was turned into blood',¹⁰⁰ this not only caused the death of a principal part of the diet for the poorer classes in Egypt,¹⁰¹ but it spelt humiliation for one of Egypt's principal gods.

Not only so, but the water-come-blood did nothing for the reputation of another of Egypt's gods – Khnum, the god who was reputed to protect the source of the Nile River and the flow of its waters.¹⁰²

What price then Ha'pi? Or Khnum?

The second plague also involved the Nile in that the Lord through Moses informed Pharaoh, 'I will smite all your borders with frogs, and the River (the Nile, that is) shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall come up into your house, into your bedchamber and on your bed'¹⁰³ ... which, according to the Psalmist, was precisely where they did penetrate.¹⁰⁴ And so, having deprived Pharaoh and the Egyptians of fish from their River, God gave them frogs instead! Yuch!

But this plague too had great religious significance. For, strange as it may seem to us, in Egypt, frogs were revered as a symbol of the goddess Hekt, the goddess of fertility and childbirth.¹⁰⁵ For this reason, no Egyptian – not even Pharaoh himself – dared presume to kill any of the loathsome creatures. Although it is clear that, when, at Pharaoh's request and Moses's intercession, God intervened and all the frogs except those in the Nile died, the Egyptians were then free to dispose of them. And so they piled them in heaps, as a result of which the land now stank of dead frogs, just as a week or so previously the River had stunk of dead fish.¹⁰⁶

I understand that the goddess Hekt¹⁰⁷ – who was always depicted with a frog's head – was believed to control the frogs and to protect the land from them. Well, she certainly wasn't doing too well during this, the second of the plagues.

What price then Hekt?

The third plague (the lice) came not, as the former two plagues, from the river, but from the land. For, when Aaron struck the dust of the ground, the dust became lice. And we shouldn't underestimate the power which brought about the transformation – for this time that which was living sprang from that which was not. It seems that this was something which only God the Creator could do ... which is why, at this point, notwithstanding all their secret arts, the magicians of Egypt threw in the towel.¹⁰⁸ But to make lice from dust was no great matter to Him who had once made man from the same unpromising material.¹⁰⁹

And this plague also had religious significance because the Egyptians were accustomed to present offerings to Geb their earth god in gratitude for the bounty which came from the ground.¹¹⁰ According to Herodotus, the Greek historian, the Egyptians set great store by cleanliness, and their priests in particular were careful to shave every other day and to wash their whole bodies twice both morning and night – for fear that any vermin such as lice would interfere with their sacred duties. Hmm, when the dust of the land became lice, Geb clearly had some explaining to do to these priests.

What price then Geb?

Plague number four consisted of swarms of flying insects, which, we noted earlier 'devoured' and preyed on the people. I suspect, as I said before, that one such insect was the scarab beetle, capable of inflicting very painful bites, and regarded by the Egyptians as sacred – representing the creation god Khepri. If I am right then, I must ask, what price Khepri?

In one way or another, the next three plagues (the deadly cattle disease, the boils (which affected men as well as beasts), and the hail with its accompanying electrical storm (which affected men and crops as well as beasts) ... all three of these plagues struck at Egypt's cattle. Such plagues were a direct insult to the god Apis, worshipped in the form of a Sacred Bull, and to Hathor the cow goddess of Egypt¹¹¹ – shown on inscriptions with at least a headdress incorporating a pair of horns, if not with the whole head of a cow.¹¹²

But, additionally, the plague of the festering boils was a slap in the face both for Imhotep, the god of medicine,¹¹³ and for Sekhmet, the goddess of healing. Depicted as a lioness (the fiercest hunter known to the Egyptians), for some reason Sekhmet was worshipped as the patron of physicians and was believed to cure diseases.¹¹⁴ But both Imhotep and Sekhmet were shown up as powerless when faced with this God-sent plague.

And the plague of hail fired its own direct broadside at Seth, the reputed god of the sky and master of the storm.¹¹⁵

Taken together, plagues five, six and seven positively thundered, ‘What price Apis? Or Hathor?’ ... What price Imhotep or Sekhmet? What price Seth?

I don’t know whether you picked this up, but at the beginning of last month there was a huge plague of locusts in Egypt ... official estimates suggest upwards of 30 million ... which stripped clean the fields and farms in the region of Giza, home to the Pyramids. I suspect it’s no more than a coincidence that this came just a few weeks before this year’s Feast of Passover!

But in the case of the eighth *biblical* plague¹¹⁶ the locusts were ‘without number’, and were by no means confined to the region of Giza.¹¹⁷ This plague brought the economy of Egypt to its knees,¹¹⁸ pouring scorn on Nepri, the god of grain,¹¹⁹ and, to some extent, on Osiris, who (among many other functions) was believed to share responsibility for both the wheat and the barley crops.¹²⁰

What price then Nepri? Or Osiris?

And then came what, physically, was Egypt’s darkest hour – save that the deep and unnatural darkness lasted all of three days.¹²¹ During the plague of locusts men had not been able to see the land¹²² ... now they couldn’t even see each other!¹²³

For in the ninth plague it was the turn of the chief of Egypt’s gods,¹²⁴ the deity who sustained all life – Rē’, the sun-god – now mocked by the thick darkness which blotted out all trace of sunlight – except in the case of the children of Israel, whose God had, at the very beginning of time, demonstrated His power to ‘divide the light from the darkness’.¹²⁵

The ancient Egyptians believed that Rē’ entered the Underworld each night, to be reborn each morning. But what price Rē’ when the darkness lasted for three full days?

And so not a few of Egypt’s top deities stood discredited ...

Well then did Moses and the children of Israel sing to the Lord some short time later, ‘Your right hand ... is glorious in power ... Who is like you among the gods, O Lord?’¹²⁶ – certainly not Ha’pi or Khnum ... not Hekt or Geb ... not Khepri or Apis ... not Hathor or Imhotep ... not Sekhmet or Seth ... not Nepri or Osiris ... not even Rē’, the chief of Egypt’s gods.

And I want to close with a quote from C. S. Lewis’s ‘Prince Caspian’ – the fourth book in the ‘Chronicles of Narnia’ series. In a scene depicting Lucy’s first encounter with Aslan in the story, C. S. Lewis tells how ...

Lucy ... gazed up into the large wise face ...

“Aslan”, said Lucy, “you’re bigger”.

“That is because you are older, little one”, he answered.

“Not because *you* are?”

“I am not. But every year *you* grow, you will *find me* bigger”.

We know, of course, that *our God* never changes – that *He* never grows any ‘bigger’. It is *our* understanding and enjoyment of Him which should be ever growing bigger!

Footnotes

- ¹ Passover/Unleavened Bread in Israel begins at nightfall on Monday 25 March 2013 (14 Nisan) and ends at nightfall on Monday 1 April 2013. Diaspora Jews observed the festival for eight days. So that in the UK and the Bahamas Passover 2013 concludes at nightfall on Tuesday 2 April 2013. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passover>
- ² Exod. 34. 25; John 6. 4; 13. 1.
- ³ For much background material from the Egypt of the Pharaoh's see ... <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/index.html>
- ⁴ Gen. 15. 13; Exod. 12. 40; Acts 7. 6-7. See 'A Survey of Israel's History', Leon Wood, pages 83-88.
- ⁵ Exod. 1. 13.
- ⁶ Gen. 45. 17-18;
- ⁷ Gen. 46. 27; Exod. 1. 5.
- ⁸ Exod. 12. 37; 38. 26. See the following email of 26 November 2012 ... 'I write because I have been rather perplexed about a few comments you made on both Lord's Day evenings you have been at Bethesda. The comments relate to the number of the children of Israel who left Egypt. Having cast some doubt on the translation of Exodus 12. 37 (arguing that the word translated 'thousand' may well refer rather to groups or clans), you suggested that the number for the whole of Israel (including women and children) might have been as low as half a million, and implied that a total of two-and-a-half to three million (based on 600,000 men) was probably too high. While not disputing that *'elep* can be used as a figurative term, I see no way in which this can be the case in Exodus 12. 37. I would point, for example, to the more precise number (603,550) cited by the Holy Spirit, both in connection with the calculation of the atonement money, Exodus 38. 25-26, and in the numbering of the people at Sinai, Numbers 1. 46 and 2. 32 (following numbers quoted for each of the individual tribes - excluding, of course, the tribe of Levi, for which we need to add a further 20,000 or so, Numbers 3. 39.) [And if we are going to discredit the number of 601,730 in Numbers 26. 51 - which represented the size of Israel's army poised to tackle the formidable Canaanite nations (note, for example, Joshua 11. 4-5).] I just cannot see therefore that the rounded number in Exodus 12. 37 can be anything other than 600,000 - which is, I note, the unambiguous translation in the LXX (*χιλιαδας*). Such a number would indeed point to upwards of two million Israelites coming out of Egypt'. But see http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/39_exodus.html
- ⁹ Exod. 1. 6-11a.
- ¹⁰ Exod. 1. 8.
- ¹¹ Exod. 1. 11, 13-14.
- ¹² Exod. 3. 7, 10; 5. 1 etc.
- ¹³ Exod. 3. 7, 9.
- ¹⁴ Josh. 24. 5; 1 Sam. 12. 8; Psa. 105. 26.
- ¹⁵ Acts 7. 20-22.
- ¹⁶ Exod. 3. 2.
- ¹⁷ Exod. 3. 10.
- ¹⁸ Exod. 3. 11; 4. 1, 10.
- ¹⁹ Exod. 4. 18a.
- ²⁰ Exod. 4. 14-16, 27-28.
- ²¹ Exod. 2. 23.
- ²² See The Amada Stela at ... http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/texts/asiatic_campaigns_of_amenhotep_ii.htm
- ²³ Exod. 5. 1-9.
- ²⁴ Exod. 5. 11.
- ²⁵ Exod. 5. 20-21.
- ²⁶ Exod. 3. 20.
- ²⁷ Exod. 4. 22-23.
- ²⁸ Exod. 5. 1 to 10. 9; 12. 31; 14. 5.
- ²⁹ Exod. 12. 1, 6, 12.
- ³⁰ Exod. 7. 25.
- ³¹ Exod. 10. 22-23.
- ³² Exod. 7. 17-20; 8. 5, 16-17.
- ³³ Exod. 9. 23; 10. 13 and 10. 21 (for which compare 8. 5-6; 9. 22-23; and 12-13 with 10. 22). Moses' use of a simple shepherd's crook. Egyptians despised the lowly occupation of shepherding. Therefore, Moses' use of a shepherd's tool to defeat them was particularly humiliating.
- ³⁴ Exod. 7. 15; 8. 20; 9. 13.
- ³⁵ Exod. 8. 1; 9. 1; 10. 1.
- ³⁶ Psa. 78. 45.
- ³⁷ Exod. 10. 7; compare Exod. 8. 24.
- ³⁸ Exod. 9. 19-25.
- ³⁹ Exod. 9. 18; 10. 6.
- ⁴⁰ Exod. 8. 22-23; 9. 4-6, 26; 10. 23; compare 11. 7. Note references to 'the Egyptians', Exod. 9. 11, and also Exod. 10. 18

⁴¹ Exod. 8. 23. But why did Israel face even the three earlier plagues? First, I need to point out something about the spiritual condition of the children of Israel during their bondage. I suspect that few Bible students realise it but there can be no doubt that through that period their spiritual condition was very low indeed. In Ezekiel 20. 5-10, the prophet rewound the video to that very period. The Lord through Ezekiel tells how that, in spite of His promise to His people of future deliverance (a promise given on oath - the significance of the gesture of lifting up the hand, verses 5 and 6), when He had pleaded with them to 'cast away' the Egyptian idols, they would not listen to Him (any more that Pharaoh would listen to Him when He pleaded with him to let Israel have its wilderness feast in God's honour and service - I note that Ezekiel uses the very same word 'hearken/listen' as is used in Exod. 7. 22; 8. 15 etc.). That is, Israel persistently refused to part with the Egyptian idols - a point alluded to on a previous occasion by Joshua ('put away the gods which your fathers served ... in Egypt', Josh. 24. 14 - which shows too that some of the children of Israel had returned to worshipping the Egyptian gods during their wilderness wanderings and the conquest of Canaan ... in spite of the proven supremacy of the Lord to all those gods which we looked at briefly last evening and in spite of the song sung so enthusiastically in Exodus 15 - especially verse 11. Incredible isn't it!) In Ezekiel 20 verse 8 the Lord actually goes so far as to say that at one point He had spoken of pouring out His wrath upon Israel because of their idolatry in Egypt. And, as He made clear, apart from His concern for His holy name and reputation, and His steadfast love for His people, they would have perished in Egypt. Please note then that at the time of the Plagues it was not only the Egyptians who deserved God's judgement. My suspicion is that the Lord caused Israel to pass through the three 'milder' plagues as a form of chastisement for their sinful idolatry - much as their later wilderness wanderings served as His chastisement on the nation for failing to enter Canaan at Kadesh Barnea as He had commanded them to do (Numbers 13 and 14, noting especially Numbers 14. 11-18, where, as in Ezekiel 20. 9-10, it was the Lord's own reputation which saved the nation from total destruction). In summary, I suggest that it was the Lord's boundless mercy towards His people which spared them the severest of the plagues, and which caused them to suffer the same first three plagues as did the Egyptians - in Israel's case as a form of discipline on account of their idolatry. For the children of Israel to feel personally the effects of the power of God (as He discredited at least Ha'pi, Khnum, Hekt and Geb) should have been enough. It was God's steadfast love which saved them from being consumed altogether. That is, the question isn't really why Israel suffered the effects of the first three plagues, but why it was that they were ever spared the effects of the other nine!

Israel's idolatry while in Egypt is also indicated by the Golden Calf in Exodus 32, and by the 'goat' worship in Leviticus 17. 7. 'The goat demon was a god that the Egyptians and other ancient Near Easterners worshipped. It was supposedly responsible for the fertility of the people, their herds, and their crops. They believed it inhabited the Deserts ... The Israelites were at this time committing idolatry with this Egyptian god'. (Thomas Constable) Some think this points to what the Greeks called satyrs--mythical creatures in half-human, half-goat form. As far as is known, satyrs were creatures of Greek mythology, not of Semitic idolatry. There is no hint that these idols were half-human. It is easiest to see here just an idol in goat form similar to the more common one in calf or bull form. cf. 2 Chron. 11. 15.

⁴² Doubtless in Goshen Israel heard the thunder, saw the lightning, marked the fall of the bruising hail-stones, but none of these touched them, Exod. 9. 26. They were spectators only.

⁴³ Exod. 8. 22.

⁴⁴ Exod. 8. 18-19.

⁴⁵ Exod. 3. 18; 7. 16; 9. 1, 13; 10. 3; cf. 5. 1-3.

⁴⁶ Exod. 8. 22. Compare Exod. 9. 26.

⁴⁷ Exod. 8. 28-31a.

⁴⁸ Exod. 8. 31b.

⁴⁹ Exod. 9. 7.

⁵⁰ Exod. 10. 26.

⁵¹ Exod. 12. 38.

⁵² Except those cattle which had been sheltered following Moses's warning and advice, Exod. 9. 19-20, 25.

⁵³ Exod. 8. 23; 9. 5, 18; 10. 4; cf. Exod. 8. 10.

⁵⁴ We can't even forecast *natural* happenings, such as rain, 24 hours ahead!

⁵⁵ 'As representative of the gods on earth, it was a pharaoh's duty to maintain universal order ... and by protecting Egypt from foreign enemies'.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/uk_tours_and_loans/pharaoh_king_of_egypt/exhibition_themes.aspx

See also ... <http://jaymack.net/exodus-commentary/Bc-Pharaoh-as-god-and-upholder-of-Maat.asp>

⁵⁶ Exod. 9. 27; 10. 16.

⁵⁷ Exod. 5. 2.

⁵⁸ Exod. 8. 25.

⁵⁹ Exod. 8. 26-27.

⁶⁰ Exod. 8. 28.

⁶¹ Exod. 10. 10.

⁶² Exod. 10. 7.

⁶³ Exod. 10. 13 - 'all that day and all that night'.

⁶⁴ Exod. 10. 8 with Exod. 10. 3-6 and 10. 12-15.

⁶⁵ Exod. 10. 24.

⁶⁶ Exod. 10. 28-29.

⁶⁷ Exod. 4. 23.

⁶⁸ Exod. 11. 5; 12. 29.

⁶⁹ Exod. 7. 3.

⁷⁰ Exod. 6. 6-7.

⁷¹ 'The desolation which the mighty arm of Pharaoh ... made among the foe belonging to the Shasu, from the Fortress of Sile to the Canaan, when his majesty marched against them like a fierce-eyed lion'. ANET 254(c) - The ancient Near East an anthology of texts and pictures. 1958 (J. B. Pritchard, Ed.) Princeton: Princeton University Press. Compare :

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=8jJvSOigpEcC&printsec=frontcover&ei=-_yrUOGVIIzATkm4HAAg&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false ... page 47.

Also ...

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=D5Dc7ncroOYC&pg=PA50&lpg=PA50&dq='Men-Maat-R%C3%A9+mighty+arm&source=bl&ots=x0uKStjY_M&sig=LibHwCNwMWd-hnYaDrcGLIM-kkk&hl=en&sa=X&ei=8I6rUPejFK2b1AX3pYGYDw&ved=0CDoQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q='Men-Maat-R%C3%A9%20mighty%20arm&f=false

See too 'the powerful arm of the king brought me to the house of my father', EA 286 at:

<http://www.kchanson.com/ANCDOCS/meso/amarna286.html>.

Also EA 147 (with three references to Pharaoh's 'powerful arm') at <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/abi-milku.htm>. Amenhotep II (1427-1400 B.C.), shown in an inscription about to smash the heads of his enemies, records, "Amenhotep . . . who smites foreign rulers of the far north, he is a god whose arm is great". Elsewhere he is called the "good god, strong of arm who achieves with his arms". Hoffmeier, J. K. (1986), "The Arm of God versus the Arm of Pharaoh in the Exodus Narratives", *Biblica*, 67:378-387. See Ezekiel, by D I Block in *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, page 176.

⁷² 'He unleashed on them his burning anger, wrath, indignation, and distress – a company of destroying angels', Psa. 78. 49; cf. Exod. 12. 23; Heb. 11. 28.

⁷³ 'These are but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?', Job 26. 14.

⁷⁴ Exod. 3. 20; 4. 21; 7. 3; 11. 9; cf. Exod. 15. 11.

⁷⁵ Deut. 7. 18-19.

⁷⁶ Psa. 78. 42-52; 105. 26-36.

⁷⁷ Jer. 32. 20.

⁷⁸ Josh. 24. 5.

⁷⁹ 1 Sam. 4. 8; 6. 6.

⁸⁰ 1 Sam. 4. 8.

⁸¹ Exod. 4. 21; 7. 3. Cf. 14. 4, 7.

⁸² Exod. 9. 12.

⁸³ Exod. 7. 13-14, 22; 8. 19; 9. 7.

⁸⁴ Exod. 8. 15, 32.

⁸⁵ C.S. Lewis said, "In the end, there are two kinds of people, those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'Thy will be done'".

⁸⁶ From Exod. 3.18 and 5.1 to the very end, 10.25-26.

⁸⁷ Exod. 3. 18; 5. 1.

⁸⁸ Exod. 10. 25-26.

⁸⁹ Exod. 12. 31-32.

⁹⁰ Exod. 14. 5.

⁹¹ Exod. 3. 8, 17; 7. 4.

⁹² 'In the work-rosters from the workmen's village at Deir el-Medina in Western Thebes, people had days off for all sorts of reasons including 'offering to one's god'—just as Moses requested 'time off' or his people to go and worship in the wilderness (Ex. 5:1) The Pharaoh might well have been chary of allowing any additional holidays!' ... Kenneth A. Kitchen, 'The Bible in its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today'. Also Kenneth A. Kitchen, 'From the Brickfields of Egypt', *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976) 137-147.

⁹³ Compare the similar plagues prophesied in the book of the Revelation ... water to blood, killer hail, darkness, skin boils ... and the destructive forces are depicted in froglike and locust-like images.

⁹⁴ When Aaron's serpent swallowed the magicians' serpents, the symbolism would clearly imply an Israelite triumph over Egypt. So, for instance, an Old Kingdom Pyramid Text uses the portrayal of one crown swallowing another to tell of Upper Egypt's conquest of Lower Egypt. See *The IVP Bible Background Commentary – Exodus* 7. 12.

⁹⁵ 'As so much else in Egyptian mythology, relationships and functions of the deities are not always clear-cut', first paragraph of <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/hathor.htm>. For an overview with details of the Egyptian gods, see ... <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/index.html>

⁹⁶ Contrast Moses with Christ, the one beginning the series of wonders by turning the river into blood ; the other, in his first miracle, turning the water into wine (John ii. 1—12). The famous Hymn to the Nile opens as follows: "Hail to thee, O Nile, that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive!"

(<http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/PDFs/articles/Noegel%2019%20-%20JANES%201996.pdf>)

⁹⁷ Exod. 1. 22.

⁹⁸ <http://rylandscott.com/Exodus/BBEx07.html>. Also 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 75.

⁹⁹ Against All the Gods of Egypt, David Padfield. <http://www.biblelandhistory.com/egypt/plagues-egypt-1.html>. Also 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 76.

¹⁰⁰ Exod. 7. 20.

¹⁰¹ Exod. 7. 21; Num. 11. 5.

¹⁰² <http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/glossary.aspx?id=211>. Also 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 110-111.

¹⁰³ Exod. 8. 2-3.

¹⁰⁴ Psa. 105. 30.

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/heqat.htm>. Also 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 84.

¹⁰⁶ Exod. 7. 21; 8. 13.

¹⁰⁷ No relation to Kermit!

¹⁰⁸ Exod. 8. 18-19.

¹⁰⁹ Gen 2. 7; 3. 19. Being the very same Hebrew word.

¹¹⁰ <http://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/geb.html>

¹¹¹ 'All Egyptians use bulls and bull-calves for sacrifice, if they have passed the test for 'cleanness'; but they are forbidden to sacrifice heifers, on the ground that they are sacred ... ' (Herodotus, The Histories).

¹¹² 'The original form under which Hathor was worshipped was that of a cow. Later she is represented as a woman with the head of a cow, and finally with a human head, the face broad, kindly, placid, and decidedly bovine, sometimes retaining the ears or horns of the animal she represents. She is also shown with a head-dress resembling a pair of horns with the moon-disk between them'. (Lewis Spence, Ancient Egyptian Myths and Legends, p. 163). See too ... <http://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/hathor.html>

¹¹³ 'An inscription ... in the temple of Ptah at Karnak ... emphasises Imhotep's ability as a healer, which ... produced identification in the Greek mind with Aesculapius, their own god of medicine', 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 99.

¹¹⁴ <http://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/Sekhmet.html>. See too, ' ... sometimes called ... the Lady of Pestilence ... she was rich in magic and the healers tried to enlist her in their fight against disease. She is depicted as a lioness', <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/ptah.htm#sekhmet>. Also 'the Egyptians adopted Seck-hmet 'lady of life' as a beneficial force in their attempts to counteract illness', 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 189.

¹¹⁵ 'Seth was a sky god ... master of storms', Encyclopaedia Britannica. 'The Book of the Dead refers to Seth as the "Lord of the northern sky", responsible for clouds and storms',

<http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/osiris.htm#set>. See also <http://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/set.html>

¹¹⁶ 'He works by law to particular effects of His will. This may be miraculous, as when a strong whirlwind acted on the sea, and another took away locusts or brought quails', JND, Letters III, page 410. As far as the Red Sea is concerned, the effect of the wind, Exod. 14. 21; 15. 10, was miraculous and not natural - hence the 'wall' on either side, Exod. 14. 22, 29; 15. 8.

¹¹⁷ Psa. 105. 34. See too ... God's 'great army', Joel 2. 25 ... 'the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness', Joel 2. 3. And – in 2013 - 'A massive infestation of more than 30 million of the insects – a plague of Biblical proportions – struck last weekend (not long before the Passover!), stripping clean the fields and farms of the Egyptian region of Giza, home to the pyramids' ...

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/165983#.UTmj8Rw3YnR> ... and http://blog.bibleplaces.com/2013/03/picture-of-week-locust-plague-of-1915.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+BiblePlacesBlog+%28BiblePlace+Blog%29

'Folks in Giza, Egypt — home of the famous pyramids — are presently grappling with just such a plague, having to fend off upwards of 30 million locusts according to official estimates (via Arutz Sheva). The insects arrived this weekend, coincidentally just a few weeks before the Jewish Passover (March 25 through April 2)' ... <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/03/04/locust-swarms-descend-on-egypt-like-biblical-plague/#ixzz2MwJeZwMS>

¹¹⁸ Exod. 10. 7.

¹¹⁹ <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/nepri.htm>. 'He represents the prosperity of the barley and enmer wheat crops which the Egyptians cultivated', 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 135.

¹²⁰ See 'Egyptian Gods and Goddesses', G Hart, page 158.

¹²¹ Exod. 10. 22-23.

¹²² Exod. 10. 5.

¹²³ Exod. 10. 23. Previously the river had turned red and the ground turned brown ... now the sky turned black ... and soon the faces of the firstborn would turn ashen grey.

¹²⁴ 'You are the Ruler of all the gods', from the Papyrus of Nekht. See <http://ancientegyptonline.co.uk/ra.html>

¹²⁵ Gen. 1. 4.

¹²⁶ It is important to note that previously the children of Israel had worshipped some at least of the Egyptian gods. See Josh. 24. 14. Indeed, Israel refused to part with their idols when in bondage, Ezek. 20. 6-9; 23. 3. Compare note 27 above.