



EXODUS 5-8 THE FIRST FOUR PLAGUES

We begin this Bible study in Exodus 5, where Moses and Aaron first appear at Pharaoh's court to ask for permission to take the Israelites to a wilderness area and celebrate a feast to their God. We will see how bad things went for Moses until God finally intervened. It shows how human he was and the importance of patience and perseverance as we face our own trials.

Moses and Aaron said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.'" But the Pharaoh refused to recognize the authority of their God and rejected their petition. As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* mentions, "Indeed, if God chose to identify himself with such a hapless and hopeless lot of slaves, and if he was so powerless to effect their deliverance, why should Pharaoh fear Him or obey His voice?"

This Pharaoh probably is Amenhotep II, who reigned around 1450-1425 B.C., the time of the Exodus. He was known as a very haughty king, who prided himself of having great strength. He mentioned he had a bow so stiff only he could draw it. In fact, when his mummy was found, there was a bow inside his coffin. "Although most of the kings of Dynasty 18 made their residence at Thebes, far to the south of the Israelites in the Delta," says Eugene Merrill, "Amenhotep II was at home in Memphis and apparently reigned from there much of the time. This placed him in close proximity to the land of Goshen and made him readily accessible to Moses and Aaron. Also, the best understanding suggests that Amenhotep's power did not pass to his eldest son, but rather to Thutmose IV, a younger son...and would suggest, as one historian says, that his reign came about 'through an unforeseen turn of fate, such as the premature death of an elder brother [the death of the firstborn]" (*Kingdom of Priests*, p. 63).

So, not only did this proud Pharaoh deny their request, but then blamed them for wanting the Israelites to take some religious days off. As Egyptian history shows, there were already numerous religious holidays dedicated to many of their 3,000 gods. "The Egyptians symbolized everything," explains Vernon McGee. "They took an abstract idea and put it into the concrete form of an image. They had deities which represented every phase and function of life. They changed monotheism into polytheism. As Sir Wallis Budge has stated it, 'They believed in the existence of one great God...but felt this Being was too great and mighty to concern Himself with the affairs and destinies of human beings. Therefore they permitted the management of this world...to fall into the hands of hordes of 'gods' and

demons, and good and bad spirits. This is what the Egyptians believed."

So, already having so many religious holidays, Pharaoh said, "Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people from their work? Get back to your labor...You are idle! Idle! Therefore you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord'" (5:4,17). Then, the indignant Pharaoh ordered the taskmasters to increase their workload—they not only had to make bricks, but also to gather the straw that was mixed with the clay.

Is it true they mixed straw in their bricks and why? "Scientific experiments have shown," says the book, *Archaeology and the Living Word*, "that the adobe bricks from this time period were *three times* stronger than a normal one. This strength is due to a chemical reaction caused by the straw in the brick that produces humic acid." *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* adds, "Chopped straw was mixed in with the clay to make the bricks more pliable and stronger by first binding the clay together and then by decaying and releasing a humic acid similar to glutamic or gallotanic acid."

Despite adding to their labor, the Pharaoh insisted they still had to meet their daily quotas of bricks. Imposing brick quotas is well documented in Egyptian history and they even have murals that show how bricks were made. Although the pyramids and temples were made of stone, the most common building material was brick. In fact, the same type is still amply used in Egypt.

When the Israelite officials in charge of the brick quotas could not meet the required number, they were punished with beatings. Similar types of beatings are also depicted in Egyptian murals. Then these officers blamed Moses and Aaron for their beatings.

So Moses complained to God for this failure. He 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."

God then consoles Moses and tells him, "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name Lord I was not known to them. I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers" (Ex. 6:2-4).

God had already explained to Moses in chapter 3 that He would now establish a special relationship with the children of Israel--as the "I AM," or Yahweh. Although the patriarchs had heard His name as Yahweh, there would now be a new relationship, *based on the great wonders and miracles* not known to the patriarchs. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* explains, "Whereas

in the past, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had known Him in the character and in His capacity as El Shaddai [the God Almighty]...now He would be known as Yahweh...the God who would personally, dynamically, and faithfully be present to *fulfill* the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The patriarchs had only *the promises*, not *the things* promised. The fullness of time had come when God was to be known in the capacity and character of his name Yahweh as He *fulfilled* what he had promised and did what He had decreed.”

God, as Yahweh, then gives seven “I will” promises to fulfill this special covenant relationship:

- 1) I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.
- 2) I will rid you out of their bondage.
- 3) I will redeem you with an outstretched arm.
- 4) I will take you to me for a people.
- 5) I will be to you a God.
- 6) I will bring you into the land.
- 7) I will give it to you for a heritage

Moses then brought this good news to the Israelites, but they did not believe his words. “So Moses spoke thus to the children of Israel; but they did not heed Moses, because of anguish of spirit and cruel bondage” (Ex. 6:9). So Moses again complained to God, and received this answer, “Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, and gave them a command for the children of Israel and for Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt” (6:13). The die is cast, and now it is finally time for God to act.

Before God intervenes, Moses’ genealogy is presented to give backing to his credentials. This was very important, for it shows Moses was a legitimate Israelite, and not an Egyptian. *The Commentary Critical and Explanatory of the Whole Bible* explains, “The insertion of this genealogical tale in this part of the narrative was intended to authenticate the descent of Moses and Aaron. Both of them were commissioned to play such an important role at Pharaoh’s court and afterwards were elevated to such high offices in the government and Church of God, that it was vital their lineage should be accurately traced. After mentioning Reuben and Simeon, the oldest of Jacob’s sons, the writer then focuses on the principal persons in the tribe of Levi—finishing with Aaron and Moses.”

Moses still does not feel adequate for the role and complains of having “uncircumcised” lips, probably referring to a speech impediment. So God again tells him Aaron would be his spokesman, and he would be to Pharaoh as “God,” for God would speak directly to Moses (Ex. 7:1-2). Again, God warns Moses that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart despite the signs and wonders that would be done. *Thru the Bible Commentary*

mentions, “The hardening of the heart is a figurative word, which can mean *twisting*, as with a rope. It means God twisted the heart of Pharaoh. He was going to squeeze out what was in it. God forced him to do the thing he really wanted to do.” *The Expository Commentary* adds, “In all there are ten places where ‘hardening’ of Pharaoh is ascribed to God, and ten places where Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Thus the hardening was as much Pharaoh’s own act as it was the work of God. Even more significant is the fact that Pharaoh alone was the agent of the hardening in the first sign and in all the first five plagues. Not until the sixth plague was it stated that God actually moved in and hardened Pharaoh’s heart, as he had warned Moses in Midian that he would have to do.”

So Moses and Aaron again present themselves before the haughty Pharaoh. “And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers, so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For every man threw down his rod, and they became serpents. But Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods. And Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the Lord has said” (7:10-13).

How could the magicians turn their rods into serpents? There are at least two possible explanations. The most likely was that they resorted to demonic powers to create the miracles. As *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* mentions, “These were probably miracles empowered by Satan, not merely some sleight-of-hand trickery. Satan is able to perform ‘all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders’ (2 Thes. 2:9) that deceive (2 Thes. 2:10, Rev. 13:11-15, cf. Matt. 24:24). *The Expository Commentary* adds, “The use of magic in Egypt is well documented in the Westcar Papyrus where magicians are credited with changing wax crocodiles into real ones only to be turned back to wax again after seizing their tails...The relation between Aaron’s miracle and the magical act of the magicians, whom Paul knew by the names of Jannes and Jambres in 2 Timothy 3:9, is hard to define. Possibly by the use of illusion and deceptive appearances they were able to cast spells over what appeared to be their staffs but which actually were serpents rendered immobile (catalepsy) by pressure on the nape of their necks and by the use of magical spells. However, as evidence of God’s greater power, Pharaoh’s magicians lost their ‘staffs’ when Aaron’s ‘swallowed up’ theirs. But Pharaoh was unaffected. His heart ‘became hard.’ There was a reason for this, as God said: “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. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord” (7:4-5).

These judgments would be not only against the Egyptians, a people immersed in gross idolatry, but also against their false gods. Exodus 12:12 says, “For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt...and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment”.

The first plague – turning the Nile into blood

Moses then faced the Pharaoh the next morning as God told him, “And Moses and Aaron did so, just as the Lord commanded. So he lifted up the rod and struck the waters that were in the river, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants. And all the waters that were in the river were turned to blood. The fish that were in the river died...Then the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments; and Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said. And seven days passed after the Lord had struck the river (7:20-25).

The Egyptians worshipped the Nile river as a god and their country’s lifeblood. Every year, the Nile would overflow its banks and bring the rich silt to fertilize the land. The Nile god was called Hapi, depicted as a man with the breast of a woman holding a frog, which indicated the powers of fertility and nourishment. So now God humiliated this supposed powerful deity and the people greatly thirsted. Nothing humbled the pride of Egypt more than this dishonor against their national god. The magicians turned some water into blood, but could not nothing to turn the blood back to water again.

The second plague – Frogs

Next came the plague of frogs. This was another favorite Egyptian god, called Heka, a female goddess with the head of a frog.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary notes, “From her nostrils, it was believed, came the breath of life that animated the bodies of those created by her husband, the great god Khnum, from the dust of the earth. Therefore frogs were not to be killed. God said He would cause another of their deities to be a curse to them, not a help. These sacred animals would multiply and infiltrate people’s bedrooms. This is ironic since the frog-goddess Heka was believed to help women in childbirth”

“Those creatures,” explains *The Critical and Explanatory Commentary*, “though the natural spawn of the river, and therefore familiar objects to the people, were on this occasion miraculously multiplied to an amazing extent...What must have been the state of the people when they could find no means of escape from the cold, damp touch and unsightly presence of the frogs, as they alighted on every article and vessel of food!”

The magicians also replicated the miracle, but on such a small scale that it did not solve the problem at all. For the first time, the Pharaoh yielded momentarily and

said, “Entreat the Lord that He may take away the frogs from me and from my people; and I will let the people go, that they may sacrifice to the Lord” (8:8).

Moses asked him when he wanted this relief, and Pharaoh answered, “Tomorrow.” So Moses “cried to the Lord concerning the frogs which He had brought against Pharaoh. So the Lord did according to the word of Moses. And the frogs died out of the houses, out of the courtyards, and out of the fields. They gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not heed them, as the Lord had said” (8:12-15).

The third plague – Lice, Gnats or Mosquitoes

The third plague was bringing on of lice, gnats or mosquitoes all over the land. “So the Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your rod, and strike the dust of the land, so that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt.

“It is debatable,” says *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “whether this word means ‘lice.’ As in the KJV, or ‘gnats,’ ‘mosquitoes,’ as we favor with most interpreters, especially the Septuagint translators (who had firsthand acquaintance with Egypt. On the fourth attempt to duplicate the miracles of Moses and Aaron, the Egyptian magicians admitted defeat.”

Whatever these pesky insects were, they viciously bit the Egyptians. If they were lice or ticks, there is an incident in Egypt that throws light on the subject. One man tells about his experience with a type of lice called ticks in Egypt, “I noticed that the sand appeared to be in motion. Close inspection revealed that the surface of the ground was a moving mass of minute ticks, thousands of which were crawling up my legs. I beat a hasty retreat, pondering the words of the Scriptures, ‘the dust of the land became lice throughout all the land of Egypt.”

Yet, “Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, just as the Lord had said” (8:19).

In the next Bible Study, we will examine the rest of the plagues, beginning with the fourth.