

5. The tenth plague: Passover (Exodus 11:1–13:16)

Announcement of Passover

(Exodus 11:1–10)

It seems clear from this section that Moses has remained in the presence of Pharaoh. It is not until verse 8 of this passage that Moses leaves Pharaoh's court. If that is the case, then verses 1–3 become problematic. Is there an actual revelation of God to Moses in the presence of Pharaoh and his court? Some translators have skirted the problem by translating the opening of verse 1 with 'Now the Lord had said to Moses', a translation indicating a pluperfect tense—as if God had told this to Moses at a previous time (i.e., before his current stand in Pharaoh's court). The problem is that no such tense is found in Hebrew narrative prose.

The verse literally opens with, 'And Yahweh spoke to Moses.' The Hebrew appears to indicate that God spoke to Moses in the midst of his audience with Pharaoh. And why not? Even if it was an audible communication (and we do not know this for certain), it would have served as a sign to, and put fear into, Pharaoh and his servants. There was no need for solitude for divine communication to take place (as on previous occasions) since the plague account was now moving towards a grand climax.

Exodus 11:3 is a parenthesis, a historical insertion by the author into the midst of the audience with Pharaoh. Verse 4 then returns to the conversation between Moses and Pharaoh.

11:1. And Yahweh spoke to Moses, 'Yet one plague I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt, and afterwards he will send you out from this place. When he sends you out from this place he will certainly drive you out completely.'

The origination and source of the plagues is announced. They are not mere natural occurrences but Yahweh has 'brought' them upon Egypt. This is the first time in the exodus account that this Hebrew term is used. In this form, 'plague' is used almost exclusively to refer to a physical blow given by an overlord to a subject and, most often, it is used of the action of the Hebrew God in meting out chastisement. This is a direct claim of sovereignty, that nature is at Yahweh's beck and call, and it performs his will. It is a striking teaching in the light of Egyptian religion, which teaches that nature is the personification of the gods. Yahweh declares that he will bring one final plague upon Egypt. It will result in the expulsion of the Hebrews. The idea that Pharaoh will drive them out 'completely' probably refers to the Hebrew people in their fulness, altogether. Remember that Pharaoh had previously said he would send the Hebrews out without their children (10:10), or at another time without flocks (10:24), and on an even earlier occasion that they could go provided they went not very far away (8:28). Now we see that the Israelites will leave Egypt in totality. Their departure will be without restriction or limitation.

The unqualified nature of the release is supported by a repetition of the Hebrew verb *garas* (the first a Piel infinitive absolute, followed by a Piel imperfect): 'He will certainly drive you out.'

11:2. 'Speak now in the ears of the people, that they might ask, a man from his neighbour and a woman from her neighbour, for articles of silver and for articles of gold.'

This command refers back to a similar directive in 3:22. It probably alludes to the same event because the people are now nearing the time of departure. The Septuagint and other early manuscripts understand it in this way, as they add 'and clothing' in this verse in order to make it the same as the earlier passage (see commentary on 3:22).

Again, this episode is a fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:14. He had declared that his people would come out from Egypt 'with great possessions'. It is also a material judgement on Egypt for having enslaved the people of God for over four centuries.

11:3. And Yahweh bestowed favour on the people in the eyes of the Egyptians. Also the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people. Just as God controls Pharaoh by hardening his heart, the Lord causes grace or favour to be bestowed on the Hebrews by the Egyptians. The verse literally says, 'He gave the people grace in the sight of the Egyptians.' It is a telling fact that the very people who had been hated and despised by the Egyptians (see

commentary on 1:12) now come to be respected by them. God is at work, changing the spirit of the Egyptians towards the Hebrews.

The second half of the verse then speaks of Moses' standing in Egypt: 'Also the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt.' How could it be otherwise? What power he had been given! What wonders were wrought by his staff and his hand!

Consider who it was that believed Moses to be so great. First, it was 'the servants of Pharaoh', which probably refers to the Egyptians. And, secondly, 'the people' stood in awe of him. This perhaps refers to the Hebrews, as it does earlier in the verse. The only one not mentioned is Pharaoh. His heart remained hard.

11:4. And Moses said, 'Thus says Yahweh, "In the middle of the night I am going out in the midst of Egypt."' '

Moses now utters the very words of God, introducing them with the divine formula, 'Thus says Yahweh ...' He conveys them in the form of Yahweh speaking in the first person. God says, 'I am going out' through Egypt. This verb is used commonly in the exodus account in relation to Israel's departure from Egypt. Because Pharaoh will not let God's people go out of Egypt, God will go out in Egypt!

Although many translations say this will take place 'at midnight', the Hebrew simply signifies 'in the middle of the night'. Night-time was an especially fearful time for the Egyptians. In the 'Hymn to the Aton', the author describes the dread of night because the sun-god has departed to the underworld and is no longer protecting the Egyptians. For the Hebrews, on the other hand, there is no fear, for 'He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep' (Ps. 121:4). Yahweh is awake, working, sustaining and protecting his people.

11:5. 'And every first-born in the land of Egypt will die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstone, and every first-born of animals.' God will bring a final, horrible plague upon Egypt. It will result in many deaths. Who is to die? All the first-born, from Pharaoh's son, who presumably was prince of Egypt and next in line of succession, to the girl slaving away in the mill. This is a merism, two opposites that are all-inclusive. Pharaoh, of course, had the greatest stature in Egypt, whereas the mill-worker had the least. Cassuto argues that in Egyptian literature the mill-worker is a common symbol for the poorest of the poor. In any case, all Egypt will be greatly affected by the plague of death.

The first-born of animals will also die. Egyptians attributed divine character to animals, and so they will be destroyed to show that Yahweh discharges judgements against the gods of Egypt.

11:6. 'And there will be a great cry in all the land of Egypt, the like of which has never been, nor will ever be.'

The intensity and severity of the final plague are expressed in a similar fashion to those of other plagues (see 9:24; 10:14). The extent of the plague will result in 'a great cry' throughout the land of Egypt. This 'great cry' will not be one of weeping or wailing, but rather a loud call for help under distress and duress. Egypt will call upon its gods for aid, but they will remain silent. The same verb, 'to cry', was used in relation to the Hebrews as they called on Yahweh for deliverance from Egyptian oppression. Unlike the Egyptian gods, Yahweh answered them.

11:7. 'But for all the children of Israel not a dog will growl against a man or an animal, in order that you might know that Yahweh makes a distinction between Egypt and between Israel.'

Whereas God will destroy the first-born of both man and beast in Egypt, not even 'a dog will sharpen its tongue' against the Hebrews or their animals. That expression signifies angry growling. There will be no such hostility in Goshen.

A debatable point is whether the author is here making a subtle reference to the impotence of Anubis, the god of the dead and embalming. On this interpretation Anubis, who had a canine form, is seen to have no power of life or death over the Hebrews, who were protected by Yahweh.

The reason for such a contrast is stated clearly. It is so that the Egyptians might know (the ending on the verb signifying 'you' is in the plural) that Yahweh makes a distinction between Israel and Egypt. The verb

means ‘to treat differently/to discriminate’ (see its use in 9:4). This is the wonderful doctrine of election in which God sets apart a people by his own will and desire. Israel, by no means of its own merit or goodness, is the recipient of Yahweh’s favour and grace.

11:8 ‘And all these your servants will come down to me, and they will bow down to me, saying, “Go out, you and all the people who are following you!” And afterwards I will go out.’ Then he went out from the presence of Pharaoh in a rage.

Moses announces that all the servants in the Egyptian court will bow down before him, rather than before Pharaoh. It is Moses (and ultimately Yahweh) who has the upper hand now. In support of this is the fact that Moses does not wait to be dismissed by Pharaoh but he up and leaves of his own accord. And he does so in great anger or, literally, ‘with a hot/scorching nose’.

11:9–10. Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh will not listen to you, so that my wonders might be multiplied in the land of Egypt.’ And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not send the children of Israel out from his land.

Here is a summary statement of the setting in Egypt after the nine plagues have occurred. From the very outset of the plagues God has said that Pharaoh would not listen to Moses. The reason is stated here: so that God’s ‘wonders’, or ‘miracles’, would be multiplied in the land. And such marvellous, terrifying events testify to the reality of Yahweh, and to his sovereignty and majesty.

Thus, the situation (particularly regarding Pharaoh’s heart) has not changed from the beginning of the plagues in chapter 7 right up to the ninth plague. However, starting with the next section, it will be narrated how the entire scene changes dramatically when Yahweh brings the tenth plague on Egypt.

Application

This section announces the climax of the plague account. It is a proclamation of death in Egypt. But even with that declaration of impending doom, Pharaoh refuses to yield or repent. One would think that such a pronouncement from a deity who already has acted by destroying Egypt with nine plagues would elicit a positive response from the Egyptian king. It does not happen.

Frankly, we should not be surprised. Even in the ultimate culmination of the plagues in the Apocalypse of John—which, as we have seen, is far harsher and more painful than the plagues in Egypt—people respond in hardness. In the plague account recorded in Revelation 16, it says that men ‘blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent, so as to give him glory’ (Rev. 16:9). Pharaoh thus epitomizes unbelieving mankind and the seed of the serpent.

Apart from God’s grace (see Exodus 11:3) all men are akin to Pharaoh. They are hardened, unseeing and unrepentant. Paul comments regarding this: ‘For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then he has mercy on whom he desires, and he hardens whom he desires’ (Rom. 9:15–18).