

The fifth plague: pestilence on the livestock

(Exodus 9:1–7)

This section relates the fifth plague that God brings upon Pharaoh and Egypt. It is the fourth time that Moses goes to Pharaoh to pronounce the same message (see 7:15–16; 8:1, 20; no audience occurred announcing the third plague).

9:1. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, and you shall say to him, “Thus says Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, ‘Send out my people that they might serve me.’ ” ’

The message is repeated. Pharaoh is directed to let the people leave Egypt, or there will be serious consequences. An important addition to the command is the inclusion of the title for Yahweh, ‘the God of the Hebrews’. This epithet has not been applied since the first plague (7:16), and it serves as a reminder to Pharaoh who it is that he is battling against.

9:2–3. ‘If you refuse to send them out and continue to hold them, then behold the hand of Yahweh will be on your livestock which is in the field, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels, on the herds, and on the flocks with a very heavy plague.’

The opening construction of the verse is frequently used to introduce an ‘if ... then’ clause. The ‘if’ is stated in verse 2; the ‘then’ appears in verse 3. A condition is stated—that if a certain circumstance occurs, then a necessary consequence will follow.

The supposition is that Pharaoh will ‘refuse’ to yield to God’s demands. That verb is used habitually throughout the plague account to describe Pharaoh’s wilful negation and denial of Yahweh’s demands (see 4:23; 7:14; 8:2; 10:3, 4). It is an outright rejection of what God requires.

The consequence of Pharaoh’s behaviour is that ‘the hand of Yahweh’, not just ‘the finger of Elohim’, as the magicians had said (8:19), will manifest itself and come in clear power. Ancient Egyptian texts characteristically describe Pharaoh’s power in terms of his ‘strong hand’. The Exodus account ironically employs that same characteristic to describe Yahweh as he humiliates Pharaoh and Egypt (see commentary on 3:19).

The animals struck by this plague are the ones that provide food, milk, clothing and transportation. Some have argued that the appearance of ‘camels’ in the list is anachronistic because they did not commonly appear as domesticated animals until the end of the second millennium. This is hotly debated. However, it does appear that camels were used at least in a limited way as early as the beginning of the second millennium.

This plague is also a polemic. Bull cults are known to have flourished throughout the history of Egypt. Egyptians viewed the bull as a fertility figure, the great inseminator imbued with the potency and vitality of life. Apis was the most important of the Egyptian sacred bulls. Other bull cults included Buchis (sacred bull of Hermonthis) and Mneuis (Heliopolis). In addition, bulls were understood as embodiments of the great Egyptian gods Ptah and Ra. Numerous important female deities are pictured as livestock animals: Isis, queen of the gods, bears cow’s horns on her head; Hathor is given a bovine head for her task of protecting the king. The biblical author is demonstrating that these gods are impostors. Yahweh is sovereign over all things.

Verse 3 begins, ‘Behold, the hand of Yahweh will be ...’ The verb is a Qal feminine participle (in agreement with the feminine ‘hand’) of ‘to be’ and appears only once in Scripture in this form. The term is probably a word-play on the name Yahweh that stands directly before it. Yahweh also derives from ‘to be’.

The severity of the plague is emphasized by the words *kābēd m’ōd*, which literally means, ‘very heavy’. The use of *kābēd* is caustic, because Pharaoh’s heart is spoken of so frequently as being *kābēd* (e.g., 7:14; 8:32). In other words, the plague is ‘heavy’ upon Egypt on account of Pharaoh’s heart being ‘heavy’.

9:4. ‘But Yahweh will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and between the livestock of Egypt. And not one shall die that belongs to all the children of Israel.’

A first proof that Yahweh is the source of this plague is the fact that he spares the herds of the Hebrews. The verb translated ‘make a distinction’ is the same one that is used in 8:22. It simply means ‘to set apart’.

The point is that God treats his people differently from the Egyptians: the latter are cursed; the former are blessed.

The end of the verse literally reads, 'And it will not die from all of the sons of Israel a thing.' The subject of the clause appears in the last position. While there is considerable freedom in the disposition of the parts of a sentence in Hebrew, this example is stark. No doubt it is emphatic to underscore the complete protection of anything that belongs to the Israelites.

The word for 'thing' is *dābār*. That is probably a word-play on the use of the word *dēbēr* ('plague') from the previous verse. One people is on the receiving end of a dbr in one way, and the other people in the opposite way.

9:5. And Yahweh set a time, saying, 'Tomorrow Yahweh will do this thing in the land.'

A second proof that God originates the fifth plague is that he sets a precise time for its arrival in Egypt. Yahweh had done the same thing for the fourth plague (8:23), and he does it again here to lay stress on the fact that the timing of the plagues belongs to him. Thus the miraculous nature of the pestilences is seen not only in their degree and intensity, but in their timing and duration.

9:6. And Yahweh did this thing on the next day. And all the livestock of the Egyptians died. But from the livestock of the children of Israel not one died.

Since the 'livestock' appear again in the seventh plague (9:19–21), the question is how to understand the use of 'all' in the present verse. In other words, how could all the livestock be killed in this plague and then still be alive to suffer the impact of later disasters? Some interpreters argue that the use of 'all' is hyperbole in order to underscore a contrast with 'not one'. Another position says that the word 'all' can be used in a collective sense, as opposed to an exhaustive meaning. Thus every type of domestic animal without distinction was struck by the plague, but not every single animal expired.

9:7. And Pharaoh sent out [messengers], and behold nothing from the livestock of Israel died, not even one. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not send out the people.

Pharaoh investigates what has happened in the land. He is told that not even one animal belonging to the Hebrews has been affected by the plague. The lack of disease among the Israelite livestock is emphasized by the use of the Hebrew phrase 'up to one'. That term is a proclitic preposition often joined to the noun it modifies by a *maqef*. It expresses degree and measure, and it perhaps takes on a privative sense. It is clear that not any—no, not a single one—of the Israelites' animals was struck by the malady. Pharaoh's activity is shown as paradoxical. He 'sends out' his servants to investigate Goshen, but he refuses to 'send out' the people of God from Goshen.

Pharaoh's denial of the request for Israel to leave was because 'his heart was heavy' (*kābēd*). The verb *kābēd* is a stative verb, indicating the condition, or state of being, of Pharaoh's heart. It is not being used as an active verb, as if the heart were in the process of becoming heavy. It simply was in a state of heaviness.

Application

It may be appropriate at this point to consider how humanity normally views or understands so-called natural disasters. When calamities of nature strike, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or diseases of cattle, people almost always see no reason or source behind the disaster. They regard it as merely a matter of chance—disorder breaking in on the normal order of nature. 'Mother Nature' is fickle and cannot be trusted. In other words, there is no purpose or meaning to natural calamities.

The Bible teaches something different. At the very heart and foundation of Scripture is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. What this means is that God is the Creator of the universe, Lord and Master of all, and his will is the cause of all things. In other words, it is God who is on the throne of the universe, maintaining the creation, directing it and working all things according to his own will and purpose. The biblical picture is that everything that happens in heaven and on earth occurs because of God's decree, will and purpose. B. B. Warfield gets to the core of the matter when he says, 'All things without exception, indeed, are disposed by Him ... and if calamity falls upon man it is the Lord that has done it.' Pharaoh and the

Egyptians attempted to explain away the plagues as not originating with Yahweh—they looked for other explanations.

The sixth plague: boils (Exodus 9:8–12)

This section relates the sixth plague that came upon Egypt. And just as in the case of the third plague, there is no audience before Pharaoh and no warning given to the Egyptians (see commentary on 8:16). That similarity probably means that the second cycle of plagues is drawing to a conclusion (see 8:20). 9:8. Then Yahweh spoke to Moses and to Aaron: ‘Take for yourselves handfuls of soot from a kiln and toss it towards heaven before the eyes of Pharaoh.’

At first glance, this command seems to be strange. Why soot from a furnace? The answer is that it is poetic justice. The type of furnace spoken of here was probably a kiln for burning bricks. The furnace, then, was a symbol of the oppression of the Hebrews, the sweat and tears they were shedding to make bricks for the Egyptians. Thus the very soot made by the enslaved people was now to inflict punishment on their oppressors.

It is specifically stated that Moses was to throw the soot into the air ‘before the eyes of Pharaoh’. The King of Egypt would thus witness first-hand the miraculous nature of the plague and he would be left without excuse. He would be unable to explain away the nature of the pestilence: it comes from Yahweh working through his prophets.

9:9. ‘And it will become like fine dust upon all the land of Egypt. And it shall become festering boils breaking out on mankind and on beast in all the land of Egypt.’

Part of the miraculous nature of this plague is the multiplication of the handfuls of soot into a ‘fine dust’ that covers the entire land of Egypt. In addition, the divine nature is reflected in the transubstantiation, or the changing of one substance into another: soot is transformed into dust. Finally, the effect of dust in bringing disease upon creatures also points to the plague’s supernatural constitution.

The type of disease is unknown. Some commentators contend that it was anthrax, an infectious and usually fatal disease. Anthrax is characterized by malignant pustules (elevated blisters or boils). Others argue it was smallpox. Much of the vocabulary used in describing the disease, however, is used elsewhere in the Old Testament of leprosy and its consequences (see Lev. 13:18–20). Whatever the disease was, it was dangerous and life-threatening.

The sixth plague became proverbial in ancient Israel. For instance, Moses later warns the Hebrews that if they disobey God’s commands, ‘The Lord will smite you with the boils of Egypt and with tumours and with the scab and with the itch, from which you cannot be healed’ (Deut. 28:27).

9:10. So they took soot from a kiln and they stood before Pharaoh. And Moses tossed it towards heaven, and it became festering boils breaking out on mankind and on beast.

Moses and Aaron did exactly as God had commanded them. This is confirmed by the repetition of entire phrases from verse 8. The result of their activity was precisely what God had predicted.

9:11. And the magicians were not able to stand before Moses on account of the boils, because the boils were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians.

This is the final mention of the Egyptian magicians in the plague account. They appear more impotent than ever. Not only are they unable to rid the land of the disease, but they cannot even protect themselves. This final word demonstrates that they and their powers have been completely vanquished and subdued by the force of Yahweh.

The Hebrew verb for ‘to stand’ is the same one that was used in the previous verse. It highlights a contrast: whereas Moses and Aaron could stand before Pharaoh and perform miraculous feats, the Egyptian magicians could not even stand before the Hebrew prophets. Here we have another proof of the power of Yahweh.

9:12. But Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as Yahweh had said to Moses.

Observe the active nature of God's work in hardening Pharaoh's heart so that the king would not relent or repent. God's direct agency has been seen before regarding Pharaoh's heart (see the commentary on 4:21 and 7:3). At other times, the text recounts that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15, 32). The reason for the alternation is perhaps to teach that Pharaoh was responsible for his own sin, yet, at the same time, God is sovereign and he had decreed Pharaoh's actions.

Application

The sixth plague, like the previous ones, is repeated and intensified in the book of Revelation. John reports the beginning of the pouring out of the seven bowls of wrath upon the followers of Satan in the following way: 'And the first angel went and poured out his bowl into the earth; and it became a loathsome and malignant sore upon the men who had the mark of the beast and who worshipped his image' (Rev. 16:2).

As before, the plagues in Egypt serve to foreshadow the plagues that are to be directed upon the ungodly in the last days. However, the plagues in Revelation are much greater and more extreme—they confirm the nature of the final judgement against the followers of the devil.

The seventh plague: hail

(Exodus 9:13–35)

Here is the beginning of the third cycle of plagues. The nature of the plagues changes in this sequence: they now have to do with weather and matters of the sky. There is no symbiotic relationship between these three plagues and the previous ones; scholars who would argue for a natural progression of the plagues stumble at this point. The hailstones of the seventh plague have absolutely no relationship to the boils of plague number six.

The contest is heating up. This audience with Pharaoh contains an extended warning to him. The issue is coming to a climax. And, for the first time, some of the Egyptians listen to Moses and the alarms that he sounds.

9:13–14. And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Get up in the morning and stand before Pharaoh, and you shall say to him, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, 'Send out my people that they might serve me. For this time I am sending out all my plagues against you and against your servants and against your people, in order that you might know that there is no one like me in all the earth.' " ' "

The beginning of the seventh plague has a familiar ring about it. The first two cycles of plagues each begin in the same way: plagues numbers one and four both open with Moses going to Pharaoh in the morning and taking a stand before him (see 7:15; 8:20). Thus it is evident that plague number seven marks the inception of a third cycle of plagues.

The command to Moses to 'stand before Pharaoh' harks back to verse 11 of this chapter. There the magicians could not stand before the Hebrew prophets. Moses, however, now takes a firm stand before the King of Egypt.

The particle introducing the clause, 'For this time I am sending out all my plagues ...', is a conjunction meaning 'because/for', or an emphatic adverb, 'indeed'. It therefore indicates the certainty of the statement that follows. It is not conditional; there is no 'if ... then' situation. It is going to happen.

What God is hurling at Egypt is a series of 'plagues'. That noun is derivative of the verb that means 'to strike', 'to smite'. It is used of a devastating blow struck by God.

The use of the verb 'to send out' is a word-play on verse 13. In that passage God demands that Pharaoh send out the Hebrews. But because Pharaoh does not do so, God responds by 'sending out ... plagues' on Egypt.

The plagues are principally targeted 'against you', or more literally, 'against your heart'. The Egyptians believed that Pharaoh's heart was the all-controlling factor in both history and society. Now the King of Egypt's heart is hardened against the Hebrews. Yahweh assaults his heart to demonstrate that only the God of the Hebrews is the sovereign of the universe.

The reason for the attack is stated. It is so that Pharaoh (and the Egyptians) might 'know' that Yahweh stands alone as sovereign of the universe. As we have noted previously, back at the time of the very first

audience in the Egyptian court, Pharaoh had declared, 'I do not know Yahweh' (Exod. 5:2). God will ensure by means of the plagues that Pharaoh and his servants acknowledge the hand of Yahweh over Egypt! 9:15. 'For if by now I had sent out my hand and struck you and your people with the plague, then you would have been wiped from off the earth.'

The idea here is that God has been long-suffering towards Pharaoh and his people, and he has sustained the King of Egypt. If God had put forth his hand in full power, the Egyptians would have perished long ago. The verb translated 'wiped off' means 'to be destroyed', and it also bears the sense of becoming unknown or effaced. An antithesis with the previous verse is apparent: whereas Yahweh will become known throughout the earth, the King of Egypt and his people would become unknown if God so desired it.

9:16. 'But on account of this I have raised you up, so that I might show you my power and in order that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'

This verse opens with a strong adversative meaning 'but, however'. It shows an emphatic contrast. God has not destroyed Pharaoh, as he could easily have done. Rather, Yahweh has, literally, 'caused you to stand' (Hiphil causative stem). Pharaoh's standing is to be viewed in opposition to the inability of his magicians to stand in the presence of Moses and Aaron (see commentary on verse 11). And the only reason Pharaoh is able to stand is because Yahweh has so willed it.

The purpose of God's sustaining hand is directly stated. It is not because Pharaoh has earned, or merited, God's grace. It is not because he does not deserve the judgement of the plagues. It is for one reason, and one reason alone: so that God's name might be glorified in all the earth. The Hebrew verb for 'proclaimed' appears here in the Piel stem. In that stem, throughout the Old Testament, the verb means to give a laudatory recital, great praise and a recounting of the greatness of God. It is a word associated with worship.

9:17. 'Yet you are setting yourself up against my people and not sending them out.'

This verse emphasizes Pharaoh's refusal to let the Hebrews leave Egypt. The verb translated 'setting yourself up' is a Hithpael, or reflexive participle, that means 'exalting yourself' and comes from the verb 'to lift up'. This verb goes right to the heart of the matter: Pharaoh is playing the deity, he is exalting himself against the Holy One of Israel.

9:18. 'Behold, this time tomorrow I am going to cause a very heavy hail to rain down, such as there has not been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now.'

God has fixed a time for bringing the seventh plague. It will not merely take place 'tomorrow', as in plagues number two (8:10), four (8:23, 29) and five (9:5). But it will be 'at this time, tomorrow', i.e., the very hour at which Moses is speaking to Pharaoh, one day later.

The hailstorm that is promised will be *kābēd m'ōd*—that is, 'very heavy'. Again, this adjective is the one that is employed to describe the state of Pharaoh's heart throughout the Exodus account. The severity of the storm mirrors the degree of the hardness of Pharaoh's heart! In addition, see the commentary on 9:3 in which the fifth plague is likewise called *kābēd m'ōd*.

The intensity of the storm is further highlighted by the statement that such a hailstorm had never been seen in Egypt since its inception. That announcement, Cassuto has pointed out, reflects a common Egyptian expression of the time. Pharaohs such as Thutmose III would assert that they had done something greater 'than all the things that were in the country since it was founded'. Yahweh employs the same idiom to demonstrate his power over any natural phenomena that had ever been experienced in the land of Egypt.

It is critical to remember that the Egyptians believed their gods to be personified in the elements of nature. The catastrophe of the hail was therefore a mockery of the Egyptian heavenly deities, including Nut (the female representative of the sky and personification of the vault of heaven), Shu (the supporter of the heavens who holds up the sky) and Tefnut (the goddess of moisture).

9:19. 'Now send out! Bring into safety your livestock and all that belongs to you in the field. Every person and every animal that is found in the field and is not gathered to the house, the hail will come down on them and they will die.'

The beginning of the verse is a double imperative: 'Now send out! Bring into safety ...' God, through Moses, gives Pharaoh good advice so that the plague should not harm his countrymen or their livestock (and Pharaoh himself owned vast numbers of livestock). God urges him and directs him to submit. The verb 'send out/forth' has been used throughout the exodus incident of what God demanded that Pharaoh should do for the Hebrews. Here Pharaoh is called to send out his people in his own interest, but once again he does not heed God's word, as will be seen in subsequent verses.

9:20. Some of the servants of Pharaoh who feared the word of Yahweh caused their servants and their livestock to flee into the houses.

Some of the Egyptians did what Moses had commanded them. They obeyed because they 'feared the word of Yahweh'. That verb often signifies a fear that is associated with reverence, respect and even worship. Its use in the exodus context perhaps suggests a remnant of believers among the Egyptian people. Even if that was the case, it was only a small number. Exodus 9:30 indicates that Pharaoh's servants as a group did not fear the Lord.

9:21. But whoever did not listen to the word of Yahweh left his servants and his livestock in the field. The majority of Egyptians, literally, 'did not set their hearts to the word of Yahweh'. Their hearts remained hardened, like Pharaoh's, to the truth and reality of God's proclamations and promises to them. The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.

9:22. And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand to the sky so that hail will be upon all the land of Egypt, on man and on beast and on every plant of the field in the land of Egypt.'

The next day God commands Moses to bring the plague on the land as he had foretold. The word for 'hail' occurs twenty-nine times in the Old Testament, and twenty of them refer to this event in Egypt (see Ps. 78:47-48). In the history of Egypt, not only was hail rare, but when it did fall it was not usually particularly menacing. Its severity in the seventh plague is quite striking.

9:23-24. And Moses stretched out his rod to the sky, and Yahweh gave thunder and hail, and fire came down to the earth. And Yahweh rained hail upon the land of Egypt. And so there was hail and lightning in the midst of the hail, very heavy; and there was nothing like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.

The severity of the storm is highlighted by the accompanying lightning and thunder. The appearance of these physical manifestations in the Old Testament often indicates the presence of God (see Exod. 19:16; 20:18). The word 'thunder' literally means 'voice'. It is a term commonly used in connection with a theophany (see Gen. 3:8; Ps. 29:3-9).

The writer comments that in the midst of the hailstorm, literally, 'fire was taking hold of itself' (the verb is a Hithpael reflexive participle). The same expression is used in Ezekiel 1:4, also in the context of a great storm. The significance of the idiom is dubious, although it has been suggested that it refers to lightning that is incessant, with strikes that appear in close succession.

The use of the word 'nation' is important. Egypt was probably the earliest united kingdom in the ancient Near East, having been in existence since about 3100 B.C. The exodus event occurred some eighteen centuries after that time (see discussion of chronology in the introduction). To say that this hail was the most severe in all the history of Egypt is a grand claim indeed!

9:25. And the hail struck all the land of Egypt, all that was in the field, from man to beast, and every plant of the field the hail struck, and every tree of the field was shattered.

The extent of the destruction caused by the hailstorm was great. It 'struck all the land of Egypt'. What the author means by that general expression is spelt out by a threefold parallelism:

all that was in the field

all plants of the field

all trees of the field.

The structure and vocabulary of each line are essentially the same (and it should be noted that each line in the Hebrew begins with the sign indicating the direct object). Cassuto comments appropriately: 'This is certainly not coincidental: we hear three mighty blows, as it were, one after the other.'

9:26. Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, it did not hail.

Once again, the region left unaffected by the severe hail was Goshen, the settlement area of the Hebrews. It remained untouched, safe, secure and tranquil. Some commentators have attempted to explain away this distinction by saying that storms hammering Egypt in the Nile Valley would have been trapped there and unable to strike Goshen. That interpretation is impossible to justify in the light of God's elective work, which is so evident in the plague account (see commentary on 9:4–7).

In the record of this seventh plague the word 'land', or 'earth', is used seven times. The first six refer to the plague that strikes Egypt, and the seventh time relates to the calm that prevailed in the land of Goshen. It is, of course, suggestive of the creation account in which the seventh day is one of rest, peace and harmony.

As an aside, it is important to note what Pharaoh does not do. He does not summon his magicians to repel or replicate the plague. Nor does he send messengers to Goshen to see if it has been affected. What had happened, or was going to happen, was all too obvious.

9:27. Then Pharaoh sent out and he called for Moses and for Aaron, and he said to them, 'I have sinned this time; Yahweh is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones.'

The King of Egypt calls for the Hebrew prophets and then makes a grand confession: 'I have sinned this time.' Pharaoh's self-condemnation is not very convincing because he is not acknowledging his earlier, previous sins and arrogance. He is only speaking of the present situation. In support of this point is his use of 'this time', or 'now', which mirrors God's use of the same expression in verse 14. It would be a mistake to conclude that Pharaoh has seen the light and that he exhibits a repentant heart. He may be weakening but he still plays the snake—lying, manipulating and twisting.

Even so, it is striking that Pharaoh should make any such confession at all. The ancient Egyptians believed in the purity of their sovereign. Individuals who approached Pharaoh were commanded to prostrate themselves, 'smelling the earth, crawling on the ground', while 'invoking this perfect god and exalting his beauty'. God is attacking this notion of Pharaoh's character being pure and untainted. There is only one who is good and perfect.

9:28. 'Pray to Yahweh, for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail. And I will send you out, and you will stay no more.'

On the surface, Pharaoh's response appears to be unqualified. However, the tone or spirit of his statement is suspect.

First, he begins with the imperative, 'Pray,' thus directing the prophets to undertake such activity.

Secondly, the reason Pharaoh gives for this command is, literally, 'because there has been too much of the voices of God' (Elohim). He refers to the thunder and hail as belonging, not to Yahweh, but to Elohim.

As we have noted elsewhere, the latter is a more generic name for deity in the ancient Near East.

Thirdly, at the close of the verse, Pharaoh declares, literally, 'You [plural] will not again have to stand ...'

The point is that Pharaoh is telling Moses and Aaron they need no further audience with him. This is ironic in the light of verse 16, in which God has allowed Pharaoh to stand before him, but now Pharaoh will not let God's prophets stand before him. Pharaoh continues to play the part of deity.

This is the third time Pharaoh has asked the prophets to intercede for him. He is, of course, being deceitful and lying again.

9:29. And Moses said to him, 'When I go out of the city I will spread out my hands to Yahweh, the thunder will stop, and the hail will be no more, so that you might know that the earth belongs to Yahweh.'

Moses' response, 'I will spread out my hands to Yahweh', is an expression signifying the act of prayer (see 1 Kings 8:38; Ezra 9:5). The reason the prophet was willing to perform this intercession was not to placate Pharaoh. It was so that Pharaoh 'might know that to Yahweh belongs the earth'

The earth is Yahweh's, and all it contains,

The world and those who dwell in it

(Ps. 24:1).

It is Yahweh who rules over the earth, not the Egyptian gods, and certainly not Pharaoh (who was considered ruler over the two lands of Upper and Lower Egypt).

9:30. 'But I know that you and your servants still do not fear before Yahweh God.'

Moses is very direct with Pharaoh. He knows that Pharaoh's confession and asking for prayer are mere empty, vain words. The King of Egypt is a liar, a white-washed sepulchre, one 'holding to a form of godliness although denying its power' (2 Tim. 3:5). The Egyptians may have feared the plagues and may have been afraid of some sort of divine power, but they did not yet fear Yahweh.

9:31–32. (Now the flax and the barley were destroyed because the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. The wheat and the spelt were not destroyed because they ripen later.)

These two verses are in the form of an antithetic parallelism. It appears as follows:

a

b

c

The flax and barley

were destroyed

because the barley was ears of grain and the flax was in bud;

a

b

c

The wheat and the spelt

were not destroyed

because they ripen later.

This literary feature is for the purpose of emphasizing the antithesis. The crops which were ripe, or almost ripe, were ruined, but those which were only at the stage of tender shoots were saved and untouched. The reasons for the antithesis are threefold. First, the preservation of the young, tender plants shows the miraculous nature of the plague. It is normally that very stage that is devastated by hail, but on this occasion God excludes it from the destruction. Secondly, it shows God's grace in the midst of judgement. God still gives sustenance to Egypt, and allows them to survive despite the plague. Why? See the commentary on verse 16. And, finally, the fact that some of the crops are kept alive provides material to receive the onslaught of the next plague, the locusts.

9:33. And Moses went out of the city from the presence of Pharaoh, and he spread out his hands to Yahweh. And the thunder and the hail stopped, and rain no longer poured down to the land.

One of the main elements in the recitation of each plague is recapitulation—that is, a brief summary or overview of what had been previously stated or recorded. See, for example, 8:17, 24; 9:6, 10; etc. The primary purpose of recapitulation is to show that the event did happen—and that it occurred exactly as God had planned and foretold.

9:34. When Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder stopped, he sinned again, and his heart was hardened, he and his servants.

Pharaoh again refuses to fulfil his word. The danger has passed, and so there is no evidence of a change of heart. The text says that, literally, 'He added to/increased the sin.' Once the threat is over it appears that he becomes still more hardened in his wickedness.

For the first time we see that the concept of a hardened heart is applied not only to the Egyptian king, but now also to his servants. Moses was right when he said in verse 30 that 'You [i.e., Pharaoh] and your servants still do not fear Yahweh God.'

The list of rain, hail and thunder is in the reverse order from that of verse 33. The two lists form a chiasmic structure in order to emphasize the cessation of the plague.

9:35. So Pharaoh's heart was hard and he did not send out the children of Israel, as Yahweh had said by the hand of Moses.

The account of the seventh plague ends with this formula that is found, in one variation or another, at the conclusion of every plague thus far (7:22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12). It is a convention of this section of Exodus signalling the final end of a particular plague episode.

Application

We read in the Apocalypse of John the following description of the seventh bowl of wrath that will be meted out on unbelievers: 'And the seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air; and a loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, "It is done." And there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty ... And huge hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, came down from heaven upon men; and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because its plague was extremely severe' (Rev. 16:17–21).

The similarities between this seventh plague in Revelation and the seventh plague in Egypt are striking. First, it should be noted that both plagues are accompanied by thunder and lightning. Secondly, the extent of the two plagues is underscored: in Egypt nothing like it had been seen in the land since it was founded as a nation (9:24); in Revelation nothing like it had occurred since man came to be on the earth. Both plagues were extremely severe, and in both instances mankind's response to them was hardness of heart or blasphemy.

The size of the hailstones in Revelation underscores the absolute extremity and severity of the plague at the end times—it is so much greater than the plague in Egypt. The disaster that befell the Egyptians was simply a mere foretaste of the final judgement. That ought to give us pause. And it ought to drive us to share the good news of Christ that delivers people from such an end.