

The eighth plague: locusts (Exodus 10:1–20)

We need constantly to keep in mind the truth that the exodus event is not merely a confrontation between Israel and Egypt. There is much more to it than that. We are witnessing a contest and conflict between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt. The gods of Egypt include Pharaoh himself (as the incarnation of Ra and Horus) and the various other gods personified in the elements of nature. It is a heavenly combat! The plagues are Yahweh's means of bringing Pharaoh and the other gods of Egypt to their knees. In the first seven plagues we have seen how God has attacked certain important deities of Egypt and how he has destroyed them. The Lord, however, has the ultimate goal of bringing glory and honour to himself through the plagues.

10:1–2. And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh, because I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants in order that I might perform these my signs in their midst, and in order that you may recount it in the ears of your sons and your sons' sons how I dealt harshly with Egypt and how I performed my signs against them, so that you might know that I am Yahweh.'

The eighth plague begins, like many of the others, with God commanding Moses to seek an audience with Pharaoh. God then explains to the prophet that he has hardened Pharaoh's heart so that the king will not relent. The verb 'to harden' in this instance is the Hiphil (causative) of *kābēd*. Derivatives of this verb have been used earlier regarding the nature of Pharaoh's heart (see the commentary on 7:14).

Before the shape of the eighth plague is revealed, God communicates two reasons for the plagues being brought against Egypt. First, they are a judgement against Egypt. The verb 'to deal harshly' in the Hithpael stem bears a sense of mockery: Brown, Driver & Briggs translate this clause: 'how I have made a toy of Egypt'.

Secondly, the plagues are to be a benefit to the people of Israel. They are to be used to educate the Hebrews and their posterity regarding the person and character of the Creator. In Exodus 18, Moses tells his father-in-law Jethro about the plagues and the deliverance from Egypt. Jethro's response is significant: 'Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all the gods ...' (Exod. 18:11). Examples of such recounting to descendants are found in passages such as Psalm 78.

10:3. So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh and they said to him, 'Thus says Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, "How long will you refuse to be humble before me? Send out my people that they might serve me."'

So Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh again. This time it is in the form of a direct rebuke: Pharaoh refuses to humble himself before Yahweh, the Lord of the universe. The verb 'to humble' is used to demonstrate a striking contrast between the persons of Moses and the King of Egypt. In Numbers 12:3 we read, 'And the man Moses was more humble than any man who was upon the face of the earth.' Pharaoh is the antithesis of the Hebrew prophet. He falsely plays the role of humility, claiming that he is a sinner—but it is all pretence.

The rebuke of Pharaoh is also sardonic. The verb 'to humble' appears back in Exodus 1:11–12 where it is used to describe how Pharaoh attempted to humble the Hebrews by placing taskmasters over them. In both passages, 1:11 and 10:3, the Piel infinitive construction of the verb is employed. Poetic justice is at work here: Pharaoh's actions now come back to haunt him.

10:4. 'If you refuse to send out my people, then behold tomorrow I am going to bring locusts into your territory.'

The nature of the eighth plague is spelled out: God will bring locusts upon the land of Egypt. Locusts constituted a particularly nasty problem in ancient Egypt. On account of that danger, the ancient Egyptians worshipped the god Senehem, who was supposed to be the divine protector against ravages from pests. An identification problem exists, however, because Senehem seems to have been a minor deity in dynastic Egypt. Why Yahweh should concern himself with mocking a subordinate deity is not clear. Perhaps protecting against grasshopper attack was the function not merely of one god, but of the

gods in general. A hint of that possibility appears in the Tanis Stele from the reign of Taharqa (Dynasty 25), which speaks of ‘a fine field, which the gods protected against grasshoppers’.

10:5. ‘And they will cover the surface of the land, so that one will not be able to see the land. And they will consume the remainder of what escaped for you from the hail. And they will consume every tree that is sprouting for you in the field.’

The picture of the plague is graphic. The locusts ‘will cover’ the land of Egypt. That verb is used throughout the exodus account: in the second plague the frogs covered the land (8:6); later, God covers the camp of Israel with quails for the Hebrews’ sustenance (16:13); and the entire Egyptian army is destroyed by being covered by the waters of the Red Sea (14:28; 15:5, 10). It is a verb that stresses the bounteous nature of the provision, whether it be for good or ill.

The text literally says that the locusts will cover ‘the eye of the land’. This is a Hebrew idiom that indicates the visible surface of the land—that is, all that the eye can see. In the book of Numbers Balak, King of Moab, has a great fear of Israel because the Hebrews ‘cover the eye of the land’ (Num. 22:5, 11). That expression reflects a great multitude.

The consequences of the locust plague are enumerated. All vegetation will be destroyed. All trees, in various stages of growth, will be ruined. The author then defines for us exactly which plants he is talking about: literally, ‘the escaped remnant from the hail’. In other words, any vegetation that survived the seventh plague, the hail, will be demolished by the locust invasion.

10:6. ‘They will fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and the houses of all the Egyptians—something which your fathers and your fathers’ fathers never saw from the day they were upon the ground even to this day.’ And he turned and he went out from the presence of Pharaoh.

The phrase, ‘your fathers and your fathers’ fathers’ recalls verse 2, which is addressed to the Hebrews and speaks of ‘your sons and your sons’ sons’. This is an important contrast. Egypt is being pointed to her past, to her time of great glory. But that celebrity and splendour are about to end. Israel, on the other hand, is being instructed about her future, about deliverance, about a promised land.

Moses gives Pharaoh no time to respond. He knows what Pharaoh has to say. With a hardened unbeliever there comes a time when dialogue must be concluded. Pharaoh is not changing his behaviour but wallowing in his sin.

10:7. And the servants of Pharaoh said to him, ‘How long will this one be to us as a snare? Send out the men that they might serve Yahweh their God. Do you not yet know that Egypt is ruined?’

Pharaoh’s counsellors step in to give the king advice. They voice disagreement with Pharaoh’s unyielding stance. And, ironically, they ask the same question God had raised in verse 3: ‘How long?’ However, it should be noted that even the court officials have no desire to accede fully to the demands of the Hebrew prophets. They recommend that Pharaoh let ‘the men’ go, the word ‘men’ being a masculine plural noun. Throughout the account of the plagues God has directed Pharaoh to let ‘my people’ go, not merely the men. In verse 11, Pharaoh appears to have accepted this counsel of his courtiers.

There is a scornful note in the way the officials refer to Moses. They do not call him by name, but merely say ‘this one’. Pharaoh’s courtiers obviously do not really fear Yahweh (see 9:30).

10:8. And Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, ‘Go, serve Yahweh your God. Who will be going?’

Pharaoh is still playing the part of the one in control. First, he has the two Hebrew prophets ‘brought back’ to the court. The verb is in the rare Hophal stem, indicating that Moses and Aaron are being acted upon, or being caused to do something. Secondly, the king commands the prophets with a double imperative: ‘Go, worship!’ This is the same double command he gave to the foremen to order them back to work in 5:18. Finally, Pharaoh plays the controller by trying to ascertain who the Hebrews believe will be going out of the land. His question is in the form of a repeated pronoun, ‘who and who?’, and this is probably for an emphatic purpose.

10:9. And Moses said, ‘We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, with our flocks and with our herds we will go, because we are to hold a feast to Yahweh.’

Moses responds by rejecting any conditions or limitations set by Pharaoh. God has commanded that all his people should go, and indeed that is what Moses demands. The inclusive nature of the departure is emphasized two ways in this verse. First, the verb 'we will go' is repeated in it. Secondly, Moses employs a figure of speech in which two opposites are all-inclusive. In other words, when he says that 'young and ... old' will go, he means not only that the young and old are to depart, but also everyone in between! The idea that the Hebrews will celebrate 'a festival to Yahweh' is no ploy on the part of Moses. The word for 'festival/feast' is found throughout the exodus account as a term for the Passover (see 12:14; 13:6; 23:15; 34:18). A note of sarcasm is evident because the celebration will be at the expense of Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

10:10. And he said to them, 'Yahweh is thus with you—if I send you out with your children! Take heed because evil is before your face!'

Pharaoh's rejoinder is bitter and condescending. The sense of it is a denial of the existence of Yahweh and his being with his people. The king exclaims that the only evidence that such a deity is real will be if Pharaoh releases all the Hebrew people. But he proclaims that he will do no such thing. In the end, the deliverance of the Israelites proves Pharaoh's words to be true.

The verse ends with the warning: 'Take heed because evil is before your face.' The Hebrew word for 'evil' is *rā'āh*. It may be a Hebraized form of the name of the Egyptian sun-god Ra. That bilingual word-play is found also in Exodus 5:19; 32:12, 22; Numbers 11:1; 20:5 and Deuteronomy 9:18. These double entendres are for the purpose of ridiculing the chief deity of Egypt, who was understood to be incarnated in the person of Pharaoh.

10:11. 'Not so! Go, now, the men, serve Yahweh, because that is what you are seeking.' So he drove them out from before Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's directive here begins with a negative followed by a demonstrative adverb: 'Not so!' Such a construction implies the opposite of what was said in the sentence with which a comparison is being made (cf. Ps. 1:4). Pharaoh is not going to release all the Hebrews.

Then he issues his royal command with another double imperative: 'Go ... serve!' Pharaoh still restricts the ones who are allowed to leave—only the men may depart. In this regard, the king has accepted the advice of his courtiers in verse 7. The reason for such a restriction is obvious. Pharaoh is holding hostage the families of the Israelite men. He knows the Hebrew men would never abandon their families, and so he is still attempting to keep Israel in subjection.

Many translations say, 'They were driven out from before Pharaoh.' However, the last sentence is actually active, not passive (being a Piel imperfect). It should read, 'He drove them out,' the 'he' obviously referring to the king. This verb has been used previously (6:1) of God commanding Pharaoh to drive all the Hebrews out of his land.

10:12. And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, so that they will come up over the land of Egypt and that they will consume every plant of the land, all that remained from the hail.'

The Lord calls for Moses to stretch out his hand (presumably with the rod in it) and bring forth locusts to destroy the remaining vegetation of Egypt. The Hebrew preposition *b'* is placed before the word 'locusts', and it is used instrumentally; in other words, Egypt's flora will be destroyed 'by means of' the locust plague.

10:13. So Moses stretched out his rod upon the land of Egypt. And Yahweh blew an east wind on the land all that day and all that night, and when it was morning the east wind had carried the locusts.

Yahweh employs a secondary agent, the east wind, to bring locusts into Egypt. Normally locusts approach Egypt from the south, and thus their coming from the east indicates an abnormal condition. An east wind is later used to divide the Red Sea (14:21).

The 'east wind' appears throughout Scripture as a sign and means of God's judgement. The Lord shatters the ships of Tarshish with an east wind (Ps. 48:7); he scatters Israel in the same manner (Jer. 18:17; Ezek.

19:12) and he dries up the wells of Ephraim with it (Hosea 13:15). Consider also its use in Ezekiel 27:26 and Jonah 4:8. The point is that divine doom is coming upon Egypt.

10:14. And the locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and they settled down in all the territory of Egypt in great numbers. Never before had there been so many locusts, nor will there [ever] be.

The phrase translated 'in great numbers' is literally 'very heavy' (Hebrew *kābēd m'ōd*). The previous plague of hail was similarly described (9:18, 24). And, of course, Pharaoh's heart has been characterized as *kābēd* throughout the plague account. Again, the extent of the plague mirrors the state of Pharaoh's heart.

The final clause of the verse is also reminiscent of the seventh plague. The author commented in 9:18, 24 that no hail had ever been as severe in the history of Egypt. That idea is present in the case of the locust plague as well. But more is added: no locust infestation in the future will ever surpass this one.

10:15. And they covered the surface of all the land. And the land was darkened. And they consumed every tree of the land and every fruit of the tree that remained from the hail. Nothing remained green on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt.

The locusts, literally, 'covered the eye of all the land'. Regarding this idiom, see the commentary on Exodus 10:5.

The onslaught was so severe that the land was darkened. The locusts swarmed upon the land in such great numbers that they hid the land from the eye. The verb 'to darken' is often used in the context of judgement and curse (Isa. 5:30; Lam. 5:17; Ps. 69:23). So in a metaphorical sense the locust plague symbolizes the darkened state of Egypt, both physically and spiritually, and its position as a nation under the judgement of God.

The figure of a locust plague representing judgement is used by the later prophet Joel against the nation of Judah (Joel 2:1–2). And he further understands the plague to be a mere foretaste of the final judgement called the Day of Yahweh. That great locust plague finds its ultimate fulfilment in the book of Revelation (9:3–4).

10:16. And Pharaoh made haste and called for Moses and for Aaron, and he said, 'I have sinned against Yahweh your God and against you.'

Pharaoh again calls for Moses and Aaron, but a new word is added to the invitation: 'Pharaoh made haste.' As the plagues intensify, so does Pharaoh's response. He appears now to be growing desperate. This is the second time that the king acknowledges his own sin in the matter (see commentary on 9:27). Here, however, he makes a broader confession. Pharaoh admits that his sin has been directed against Yahweh and his prophets (he uses the second person masculine plural). Note that he does not acknowledge any wrongdoing against God's people in general, and thus his admission is still inadequate.

10:17. 'Now please forgive my sin only this once, and pray to Yahweh your God that he might only remove this death from upon me.'

The king apparently acknowledges his sin. But, truly, how remorseful is he? He does seek forgiveness. Yet, he says, 'only this once'. In other words, Pharaoh is recognizing some responsibility for the present plague of the locusts, but he refuses to own up to any liability for the first seven disasters. The fact is that he is only admitting present culpability in order to cause removal of the present plague.

Pharaoh's admittance of sin is significant. The ancient Egyptians believed him to be divine and sinless during his lifetime, and at death he was not thought to face any judgement. He was simply transformed into the god Osiris, who presided over judgement and death. But in the exodus episode he is pictured as one who is deserving of facing judgement day and death.

10:18. So Moses went out from the presence of Pharaoh and he prayed to Yahweh.

There is no dialogue on the part of the Hebrew prophets. Their only response is to leave the presence of Pharaoh and then make supplication to Yahweh. Again, it should be observed that the prophets do not pray to the Lord in the presence of the Egyptian king.

10:19. So Yahweh changed the wind to a very strong west wind and it lifted the locusts and it drove them into the Red Sea. Not one locust remained in all the territory of Egypt.

The prevailing winds in Egypt come from the east, from the direction of the Red Sea. This verse literally says that ‘Yahweh turned the very strong wind of the sea.’ In other words, the Lord made a major alteration in the direction of the wind in order to carry the mass of locusts into the Red Sea. This event of destruction serves as a foreshadowing of what God later does to the Egyptian army. Yahweh hurls Pharaoh’s forces into the sea ‘and not one of them remained’ (Exod. 14:28; the same Hebrew wording as in the present verse).

10:20. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not send out the children of Israel.

The eighth plague has the same conclusion as the previous ones. (For comment upon Yahweh’s role in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and the use of ‘hardened’, see Exod. 4:21.)

Application

The drama of the exodus is beginning to reach fever pitch. Note that verse 1 of this section relates the hardness of the hearts of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and then the final verse (10:20) also tells of the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart. This reprise of the opening theme emphasizes the absolute unyielding and unbending nature of Pharaoh and the other leaders of Egypt. No matter that all Egypt was falling apart around them, the unbelieving leaders still failed to comprehend what was happening to them. They had a distorted view of the operation of the universe. And that is true of the ungodly throughout the ages—they do not realize that a sovereign God is in control. Their hearts are hardened towards him.

Locust plagues are symbols of how God metes out judgement in the Scriptures (see Deut. 28:38; 1 Kings 8:37; 2 Chron. 7:13). One is used in the book of Revelation to represent the tormenting of unbelievers: ‘And out of the smoke came forth locusts upon the earth; and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And they were told that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only the men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. And they were not permitted to kill anyone, but to torment for five months; and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings a man’ (Rev. 9:3–5).

The locust plague in Exodus devours the grass, every green thing and the trees. But that is nothing compared with the locust plague at the end times, when the locusts will torture ungodly people.

The ninth plague: darkness

(Exodus 10:21–29)

The ninth plague comes without any audience before Pharaoh. It arrives without warning, just like the sixth and ninth plagues. So ends the third triad of plagues.

10:21. Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand to the heavens so that there will be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that may be felt.’

Yahweh’s power over the gods of Egypt is clearly displayed in this image. The ancient Egyptians regarded Amon-Ra, the personification of the sun, as their chief deity. For them his rising in the east was the symbol of life and resurrection. He was the creator-god. However, when Amon-Ra sank in the west this was understood to represent death and the underworld. When Yahweh wills it, the sun is darkened, and Amon-Ra is hidden and unable to shine upon his worshippers. During the ninth plague Amon-Ra does not rise and does not give life; his realm is death, judgement and hopelessness.

The miraculous nature of the plague is not only in its timing but also in its severity. The verse refers to a darkness that may be ‘felt’, or ‘handled’. This verb is a Hiphil, and it only appears in that form in only one other place in the Old Testament, Judges 16:26, in which Samson asks to be able to feel the pillars of the Philistine temple. The idea being conveyed regarding the darkness is its peculiar thickness, density and heaviness.

Some commentators want to explain the ‘darkness that may be felt’ by arguing that this plague is really a sandstorm, or the khamsin from Arabia that brings thick dust or sand to Egypt. There is absolutely no justification for such a naturalistic explanation of the Scriptures.

See the commentary on 10:15 regarding ‘darkness’ as a symbol of judgement and the curse.

10:22. So Moses stretched out his hand to the heavens, and a deep darkness was in the land of Egypt for three days.

The Hebrew term for 'deep' is actually another term for 'darkness'. And thus the clause reads, literally, 'and a dark darkness was in the land ...' 'Deep' is also a word associated with the darkness that accompanies God's judgement. Often the noun is figuratively used of calamity brought on by Yahweh. Consequently, the use here of the word 'deep' emphasizes the judgemental nature of the ninth plague. The Septuagint adds the word for 'storm/tempest' to the passage. This may be an attempt by early translators to provide a natural explanation for the plague of darkness. Again, there is no evidence from the Masoretic Text that the biblical author sees anything but a supernatural intervention.

The figure of 'three days' as the duration of the plague may be significant. In the Old Testament the number three sometimes symbolizes completeness, finality and definitiveness (cf. Isa. 6:3). In the case of the ninth plague it may indicate the final defeat of Amon-Ra and the other gods of Egypt.

10:23. One could not see one's brother and one could not rise up from one's place for three days. But for all the children of Israel there was light in their dwellings.

The miraculous nature of the plague of darkness is emphasized here. First, a distinction is made between the Egyptians and the Hebrews: God's people have light and Pharaoh's people do not. Secondly, apparently the Egyptians could not even light lamps or candles to see, whereas the Hebrews could. Yahweh is truly the provider of light (not Ra!). It does not exist apart from him, and he bestows it upon whom he will.

The contrast also represents a profound metaphor. In the Old Testament, light signifies covenant blessings such as prosperity, peace and justice. Darkness, on the other hand, reflects judgement, curse and death.

10:24. Then Pharaoh called Moses, and he said, 'Go, serve Yahweh! Only your flocks and your herds will be left behind; also your children may go with you.'

Back in 10:8, Pharaoh had uttered the same opening words: 'Go, serve Yahweh!' In that instance he had made a reservation that the Hebrew women and children would not be allowed to go with the men (10:10). Now we see that the king backs away from that pronouncement and allows them to depart. Thus, he is made to regret his previous kingly edict.

Pharaoh is not humble, however. He does not accede to Yahweh's commands. He still refuses to let go. He orders the Hebrews to leave their flocks and herds behind. The Hebrew verb used for 'leave behind' really means that the animals would be 'detained'. It is a strong verb that indicates a 'persistent overtone of wilful, deliberate, or intentional action'. Pharaoh still has the desire to destroy the Israelites. How long could they survive in the wilderness without food or other necessities?

10:25. But Moses said, 'Indeed, you will give into our hands sacrifices and burnt offerings and we will make [a sacrifice] to Yahweh our God.'

Moses replies directly and assertively. His answer begins with the words, 'Indeed, you ...'; it is an emphatic particle followed by a personal pronoun. Moses now commands the King of Egypt!

Not only will the Hebrews take their own animals with them (see next verse), but Pharaoh will provide livestock from his own herds for the sacrifice of the Israelites. The verse literally says, 'Indeed, you, you will give sacrifices and burnt offerings ...' Thus Moses declares that the Hebrews will leave with their own animals in addition to those given them by Pharaoh. It is ironic that Egypt should provide the resources for the Hebrews' worship of Yahweh.

The most basic meaning of the verb used here for offering sacrifices is 'to do/make'. However, one of its various meanings is 'to observe/celebrate a festival' (see Exod. 12:47-48). That is clearly its meaning in the present context.

10:26. 'And also our livestock will go with us. Not a hoof shall remain. Because we shall take from them to serve Yahweh our God. And we will not know what we will use to serve Yahweh until we arrive there.'

Moses does not yield an inch to the Egyptian king. Here he employs a figure of speech called a synecdoche of the part to emphasize that not one animal of the Israelites will remain in Egypt. When he says, 'Not a hoof shall be left behind,' a part (the hoof) is used to represent the whole animal. In other words, every single animal is leaving!

The prophet reasons with the monarch. His argument is basically that the Hebrews need their animals in order to worship God. They are not certain how many of their livestock they will need for worship; thus they must take them all. As we shall immediately see, such rationalization is wasted on Pharaoh.

10:27. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to send them out.

Yahweh again steps into the centre of the action. Note the sequence: Yahweh hardens Pharaoh's heart and then the Egyptian king refuses to let the Hebrews leave. The point is that God's volition is being exercised in the scenario. It is not Pharaoh who is in control, but God's will that is done.

10:28. And Pharaoh said to him, 'Go from before me! Guard yourself, that you do not see my face again, because in the day that you see my face, you will die.'

The king attempts to expel Moses from his presence with vindictive words and angry threats. There is a clear warning here: Pharaoh cautions Moses with a Hiphil imperative meaning, 'Take heed!' or 'Be on guard!' The base nature of Egypt's king is revealed in this verse. He simply has the desire to kill Moses. Pharaoh's final statement sets up a scene of self-ridicule. Egypt is under the effects of the ninth plague—that is, total darkness upon the land. And now Pharaoh speaks of 'the day that you see my face'!

10:29. And Moses said, 'As you have said, I will never see your face again.'

This verse plays on the wording of verse 28, and it literally reads, 'I will never again see your face.' Moses thus pronounces Pharaoh's words from the previous verse as prophetic. The Hebrew prophet will not see Pharaoh's face because it is hidden in darkness, and the Hebrews will soon leave Egypt.

Application

This plague is also a forerunner of a catastrophe that appears in John's Apocalypse. We read in Revelation 16:10–11: 'And the fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast; and his kingdom became darkened; and they gnawed their tongues because of pain, and they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores; and they did not repent of their deeds.' The extremity of horror experienced in the final plague at the end of the ages is underscored by the actual physical pain that the ungodly will suffer because of it. The Exodus plague is terrible, but this one is overwhelming.