

Parashah Fifty

Ex 7:19–8:16 (20 H); Joel 3:9–21 (E), 4:9-21 (H); Rom 9:17–18

notes by Tim Hegg

The Unseen Battle

Our *parashah* this week focuses on the first three of the ten plagues: the Nile turned to blood, an infestation of frogs, and an infestation of flying insects. We also see the first stages of Pharaoh's heart becoming hardened against Moses and Aaron, and against the people of Israel, but most importantly against God.

The first plague was against the River, known historically as the Nile. For the Egyptians, the Nile was the god Hapi. Another god, Osiris, was credited with the annual flooding of the Nile, which caused the surrounding land to be fertile for the next year's crops. This annual inundation occurs in September/October, and was celebrated by the Egyptians as the gracious manifestation of their gods in supply food for the nation. It is significant that the first plague was against the Nile, for it announced divine judgment against the Egyptians for the merciless killing of Israelite infant males at the command of the Pharaoh. Furthermore, it could not have been lost upon the Egyptians that when the God of Israel struck the Nile, it announce divine judgment against the gods of Egypt as well.

Modern scholars, who deny the presence of miracles in our world, find a number of natural explanations for what the biblical text describes as turning the Nile into blood. Some postulate the growth of red algae that turned the water red. Others suggest that the waters which flowed into the Nile from the mountains in Ethiopia gathered the red soil, thus making the River appear red as blood. But such explanations overlook the fact that not only was the water of the Nile red in color, but also water in all the wooden and stone vessels (7:19, cf. 7:21 which indicates the blood was throughout the whole land of Egypt). The only explanation for such a phenomenon is that God, miraculously, turned all the water in Egypt into blood, just as the text says. Moreover, the fact that the water containers of the Israelites remained clear could only be accounted for through a miracle. The God of Israel is the God of the miraculous. If He created the heavens and the earth, turning the water of the Nile to blood was nothing too difficult for Him!

The text indicates that the magicians of Egypt were able to perform a similar fete. It is not clear if they also turned water to blood, or if they were able to turn the bloody water back to its normal state. The latter is more likely, since by their demonic craft Pharaoh's heart was strengthened (חזק, *chazak*). This must mean that Pharaoh was encouraged to believe that his gods were able to overturn the work of the God of Israel. But God had already told Moses and Aaron that Pharaoh would not listen (7:4). Indeed, 7:23 literally says that Pharaoh did not "set his heart even to this." In other words, he gave the whole matter not a moment's thought.

The text indicates that the first plague lasted for seven days (7:25). The Hebrew literally says "seven days were filled up after Adonai struck the Nile." The divinely ordained period of a week, set forth initially in the creation account, is the signature of the God of Israel.

God therefore again gives the command to Moses and Aaron to approach Pharaoh with the divine edict: "send forth My people that they may serve Me" (8:1 [Eng]; 7:26 [Heb]). This command was immediately followed by imposing the second plague, that of frogs. The Egyptians worshipped a goddess named Heqt, the consort of the god Khnum. This frog-headed goddess was believed to be the goddess of fertility, and thus the massive death of the frogs was a divine retribution against the edict commanding the mid-wives to kill the male babies of the Israelites.

Since the frogs' natural habitat for reproduction was the Nile itself, now clogged with dead fish,

the amphibians were forced to the land carrying the disease of the Nile, and died *en masse*.

Once again, the magicians of Egypt were able to reproduce the phenomenon, but not in causing the infestation of frogs to cease. Rather, they were only able to bring more frogs up to the land (8:7, Eng; 8:3, Heb). As a result, Pharaoh recognized that reliance upon his gods was futile, and he thus requested of Moses and Aaron that they entreat their God to remove the frogs. Moses gives Pharaoh the privilege of determining the time when the frogs should be removed, adding proof that when such occurred, it was truly the God of Israel Who made it happen. Incredibly, Pharaoh opts for “tomorrow” (8:10, Eng; 8:6, Heb)! Was he holding out hope that his magicians could work some relief in the meantime?

The intercessory work of Moses is portrayed with the words “Then Moses cried to Adonai concerning the frogs” (8:12). Moses as the mediator between God and man will become a significant theme in the book of Exodus, revealing the work of the priesthood who would represent Israel “before Adonai.” God acts in accordance with Moses’ request, and the frogs “died from the houses, the courts, and the fields.” Once again, the death of the frogs *en masse* just at the time of Moses’ prayer makes it clear that the God of Israel was in control and performing miracles to bring about these events.

But the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart is seen in that once the major problem of the infestation is alleviated, he “honored” (כָּבֵד, *kabeid*) his heart and refused to listen to the demand given to him by God through His servants, Moses and Aaron. Once again, the text emphasizes that this was exactly what God had indicated would happen (“just as Adonai had said,” 8:15 Eng; 8:11 Heb).

This sets up the third plague of flying insects. But this time, Moses and Aaron are not instructed to approach Pharaoh with the demand to “send forth My people” before evoking this devastation. The third plague therefore comes upon Pharaoh and Egypt as the immediate judgment for Pharaoh’s unwillingness to heed the command of Adonai given before the second plague.

Aaron alone strikes the “dust of the earth” to evoke the third plague, whereas in the first two, both Aaron and Moses are viewed as acting. The Sages note that it was inappropriate for Moses to strike the dust of the land, since he had previously used it to cover the body of the Egyptian he had killed. It is not certain exactly what the flying insects were (פְּגָמָה from the root פָּגַן), but some scholars suggest mosquitos. Others translated the word with “lice.” The Lxx appears to have understood the words as “gnats.” Regardless, the infestation of flying insects continued to inundate Egypt with disease. The magicians of Egypt once again attempt to duplicate the phenomenon, but are unable, and concede to Pharaoh that “this is the finger of Elohim” (8:19, Eng; 8:15, Heb). No one could deny the reality that the God of Israel was personally in control of the situation. Yet, for a third time, Pharaoh’s heart was hardened. In spite of the obvious, that Israel’s God was in control, Pharaoh refused to bow. In the hardness of his heart, he still believed he could overcome the hand of the Almighty.

It is clear that in these opening three plagues, the battle is only secondarily between Egypt and Israel. The primary battle is being waged between God and demonic forces. The sorcerers (מְכַשְׁפִּים) and magicians (חַרְטָמִים) utilize their “secret arts” (לְהַטִּים) in attempting to duplicate the work of God. The word “secret arts” is formed on the root לָהַט (an alternate form of לָט) having the meaning “to burn.” This most likely connects their work with sacrifices to the pagan gods, which we know are actually demons (cf. 1Cor 10:20). Did the magicians use slight of hand or trickery, or were the demonic powers able to actually duplicate the substance of the first plagues? Most likely both were involved, for the evil one is the father of lies (John 8:44). The work of the demons is primarily a

deception. Yet such deception is powerful, for the mind given over to it believes that the deception is real. Moreover, it is clear that demonic forces have power, and that they can manipulate things in this fallen world to appear as though they actually have divine power. This, of course, is their motivation, to “be like God” in the sense of having equal or even greater power than the Almighty. Yet they win their battle only when one believes their lies.

It would be one thing if the battle of the “heavenlies” (Eph 6:12) were contained in the heavens. But it is also fought in the realm of this world. God has designed that His people should also engage the battle with the evil one, and by His power, win over his deceptions. But the ability to discover and expose the deception of the evil one and his cohorts is vested in God’s gracious revelation of the truth. As long as the heart of man remains in the darkness of falsehood, he stands no chance to see the enemy’s deceptions for what they truly are. Therefore, it is God’s revelation of Himself that shines forth and exposes the weapons of the enemy to be puny and futile. It is no wonder, then, that the evil one always attempts first to discredit the revelation of God in the Scriptures and in His Son, Yeshua. The sad state of affairs evident in mainline Christianity of our world may be traced first to the prevailing position among scholars and religious leaders of our day, that the Bible cannot be trusted. When the brilliant light of God’s divine revelation is diminished, the shadows in which the enemy lurks grow all the more dominant. It should come as no surprise that the enemy’s first attacks against the current Torah movement is to undermine the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

But the fullest revelation of God to man came in the incarnation of our Savior. Yeshua is the full outshining of the glory of God, and provides an exact representation of the Almighty (Heb 1:3). Once again, it should be no surprise that in the Torah movement of our times, the eternal nature and divinity of our Messiah would come under attack. If we are to remain valiant soldiers in the spiritual battle in which we are engaged, we must always affirm as our foundation the divine truth of the Scriptures, and the mysterious, eternal and divine nature of the Messiah, Yeshua. For it is “in Messiah” that we find our primary identification. As Paul wrote:

*Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature;
the old things passed away;
behold, new things have come.
(2Cor 5:17)*