

Study Notes for Lesson 4

Exodus Chapters 8-10

Plague Two: Too Many Frogs

After seven days, Aaron and Moses returned with the second plague: frogs. There were two frog-headed gods in the Egyptian pantheon. Heh was a male god who represented infinity, or long life. Often shown with a frog's head, his name was the symbol that represented one million in Egyptian. Heqet was the goddess of fertility, often represented as a frog sitting in a lotus flower. Every year as the Nile River overflowed, the frogs would multiply around the river, and thus the frog was a natural symbol for birth and fertility. But the arrival of the frogs of this plague went beyond the simple facts of the natural year, to a supernatural display of God's power over the false gods of Egypt. The normal yearly appearance of thousands of frogs became, ironically, millions of frogs "coming up" as Moses said, to invade the homes of the people. These animals, superstitiously regarded as having divine powers, and normally harmless, became a curse and a plague.

Once again the magicians tried to show that they were as powerful as Moses, though all they could do was come up with a few more frogs. When the frogs did not go away, but became a source of constant annoyance and complaint from his subjects, Pharaoh humbled himself enough to send for Aaron and Moses.

Once he had proudly said, "Who is the Lord?" Now he acknowledged Jehovah for the first time, asking them to intercede with Him so the frogs will go away. Acknowledging Jehovah as *a* god, is a long way from acknowledging Him as *the* only living God, but it is a first step towards that knowledge. He agrees that the Israelites can go, but it is a promise lightly made. Moses knows that Pharaoh has not really been humbled and so he does something designed to reinforce God's power to Pharaoh in the removal of the plague.

Moses says Pharaoh may have a little "glory" or authority over him; that is, he gives Pharaoh the right to name the day for the plague of frogs to end. This would prevent Pharaoh from thinking they just went away on their own. Pharaoh names the following day and, right on schedule, all the frogs die at once, leaving the Egyptians with millions of frogs to dispose of. Ironically, the Egyptian God of Long Life and the Goddess of fertility would now be connected in the minds of the unfortunate people with great piles of stinking, dead creatures. That something so connected to the religious devotion of the Egyptians would become a curse to them was clearly part of God's design. The overwhelming demonstrations of God's power in the various plagues constituted a carefully planned showdown between the gods of Egypt and the true and living God, Jehovah. Both the Egyptian people and the Israelites were paying close attention to the outcome of the contest.

Third Plague: More Pests

Next comes an unannounced 3rd plague—unannounced because Pharaoh's promise was falsely made and he had no intention of keeping it. As a chastisement God commands Moses to smite the earth and send the third plague without warning of any kind to Pharaoh, a pattern repeated two more times before Pharaoh's proud will is finally broken enough to let Israel go.

It is not altogether certain what is meant by the word translated *lice* in the King James Version and gnat or mosquito in others. This is not important.

Whatever the tiny insect of the third plague, they greatly tormented both animals and men, who were constantly scratching or swatting to get some relief. Now the magicians were forced to admit their failure. "This is the finger of God," they say. Nevertheless, Pharaoh refuses to budge.

God sends Moses and Aaron to confront him once again. They repeat God's demand, "Let my people go, that they may serve me." (Ex 8:20) If Pharaoh refuses, he will be visited with a fourth plague: swarms of flies (or some other insect—the translation is not certain) all over Egypt except in the land of Goshen. Some scholars think this insect was a kind of beetle sacred to the Egyptians, which would be yet another blow to their gods. And for the first time there would be a "severance" between Egypt and Goshen, the part of the land where the Israelites lived. The plague will touch the Egyptians but not God's people. Pharaoh's heart is hardened even more as the land is overrun with swarms of insects.

Chapter 8: Pharaoh Offers Compromises

The insect plague dents Pharaoh's armor enough so that for the first time he suggests to Moses two, of what will ultimately be four¹, compromises. We can see patterns here of the kind of compromises suggested by Satan, of whom Pharaoh is a type, as he attempts to keep all mankind in bondage.

- First, he would be willing to give them time off from their labors to serve God if they would just stay in Goshen to do it, rather than leave as they had requested. Satan offers Christians the same compromise. *You don't need to leave the world to have God in your life. Stay in the world and worship your god. Keep the best of both worlds. What can be the harm in that?* But Moses refuses, saying they cannot stay in the world of Egypt and correctly worship their God, for their worship would directly challenge the Egyptian worship system and be an abomination to them². The world mocks and finds our beliefs abominable.
- Pharaoh counters with his next compromise: OK, you can go into the desert as long as you don't go very far. Just as Satan would tell a believer that they don't need to be *very* different from non-believers. *Don't go too far with this religion stuff or you'll become fanatic.*

As soon as the pests are gone, so is Pharaoh's motivation to deal honestly or comply humbly with Jehovah's request, and he hardens his heart once more.

Chapter 9: Cascading Losses

Moses and Aaron are sent again with God's thundering imperative: "Let my people go." Pharaoh refused because he was under the delusion that, as his slaves, the Israelites belonged to him. But they were never his. They were God's people. He had been shepherding them throughout their entire history, and He always had a plan and a purpose, both for their going down into Egypt and their coming out again. Remember, this whole story can be read as an allegory of the way in which God frees any man or woman from slavery to the things of this world, and to Satan, who is the "prince of this world." (D&C 127:11; John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11) Christ calls us *all* to be free from all the bondages of this world, and He always has the power to free those who wish to identify as His child. One might say that in the same way that God dealt with Israel, He has always had a plan and a purpose for our time of sojourning in this world, with its wickedness and opposition. And He has always made a way for our escape from whatever bondage we may find ourselves in.

Fifth Plague: Animals Die

In Exodus 9 the seriousness of the plagues increases. Moses announces that God will send a deadly disease upon all the livestock "which are in the field." For the second time Moses tells Pharaoh that a division will be made by God between the children of Israel and the Egyptians. The plague would not touch God's own. The consequences to Egypt from the loss of so much livestock would have been a heavy economic blow but also a psychological blow to the country.

Pharaoh is unmoved by the threat and Moses leaves his presence. Great destruction comes the next day as promised; "All the cattle of Egypt died³: but of the cattle of the children of Israel died not one." (Ex.9:6) Pharaoh sent servants to check if it was true that no cattle in Goshen died. When he found it was true, he was not sorry for the harm he had brought to his own country, but he was filled with fury and hatred against Moses, God and God's people. He does not consider that any of the blame is his. Perhaps he is angry too at the challenge to his gods.

Repeating the theme of the plagues being a challenge to the foundations of Egyptian religion which deified animals and mixed them up with human beings, many of the animals that died were considered to be under the special protection of their god counterparts: Hathor, the cow goddess; Khnum, the ram-headed god; Osiris, whose image was often a bull; and Set, a man with the head of a donkey or horse. Statues and images of sacred bulls, cows, snakes, jackals, rams, sheep, beetles, dogs and cats have been found in Egyptian archeological sites. The deification of animals and the blurring of the separation between man and animal led to some religious practices and myths that are not suitable to print in this study, but the hint of which shows that pagan worship in ancient societies was a degrading influence in many ways⁴. The true religion God revealed in the Old Testament always made a careful and profound distinction between animal and human, and God commanded that the edges of these categories never be blurred.

Sixth Plague: Boils

Given Pharaoh's anger, God does not bother to send Moses back with another request or with a warning. He simply sends the sixth plague of boils upon all the Egyptians. Now each individual, from the greatest to the least, feels the plague physically. For the first time the king feels the hand of God upon his own body; his royal status cannot buy him relief from the painful sores. This heavy warning is meant to impress upon Pharaoh that he is not immune from the suffering he is bringing on his people.

Moses Gives it to Pharaoh Straight

Pharaoh refuses to be moved. But his obstinacy is not only self-defeating, it actually serves God's purposes, as we shall see. The Lord once more sends Moses to stand before Pharaoh "early in the morning." There he delivers a longer speech than he has before, for it includes an explanation of the plan and purpose of the plagues. God, through Moses, sets out the following facts:

- His unchanged demand that Pharaoh let His people go, so that they may serve Him, the only true God.
- His warning that "I will send all my plagues upon thy heart." (9:14) Up until this time, Pharaoh has been unmoved by the suffering of the Egyptian people, removed from them by his royal privilege. But

subsequent plagues will move nearer and nearer until they break his own heart. When one has hardened one's heart to stone, the only way for God to get through to the still beating center, is to break it.

- "That thou mayest know that there is none like me in all the earth." Pharaoh scorned Jehovah when he first heard the name. God will have Pharaoh to know exactly how powerful He is and where the gods of Egypt stand in relation to Him.
- "For this cause have I made thee to stand...that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." The story of this epic battle between the gods of Egypt, with Pharaoh as their representative and Jehovah, with his prophet Moses speaking for Him, is as widely known as any story on earth. It spread like wildfire throughout the ancient world. Everywhere that the Israelites went they were met with a response like Rahab the harlot's: "I know that ...all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt." (Joshua 2:9-10) Book of Mormon prophets also frequently repeat the story to gather their own courage in difficult circumstances. Alma, for example, says, "I have been supported under trials and troubles of every kind... yea, and I will praise him forever, for he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea." (Alma 36:28) (See also Helaman 8:11; Mosiah 7:19; 1 Nephi 17:26-27; 1 Nephi 4:2)

God chose Pharaoh to play his part in the drama because he knew what kind of a man Pharaoh was. He knew that each plague would cause Pharaoh to harden his heart even more, until the bitter end, thus providing a stage in human history on which God could fully display His immeasurable power to act in behalf of His people. God had said to Moses in their first "interview" at the burning bush, "I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof: and after that he will let you go." (Exodus 3:19-20)

What is a Hardened Heart?

Perhaps it is time to explore more fully the question of a hardened heart. The image figures prominently in this story. There are 15 references to Pharaoh's heart hardening in the book of Exodus. Six of those say God initiates the action. Four references say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and five verses simply state that Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" in the passive tense. Joseph Smith used the occasion of his revisions of the Bible text to switch the order of words so that it was always Pharaoh that initiated the hardening. And all faithful Christian commentators who have looked at this story certainly agree with him that God would never *cause* a man to sin, then bring down judgment for a sin he was "forced" to commit. But what exactly is the process by which a heart becomes hard, and does God have any hand in it at all?

One Biblical commentator put it thusly: " 'He will not' leads inevitably to 'He cannot.'⁵" Substitute another pronoun and this reads: "'I will not' leads inevitably to 'I cannot.'" I believe all of us can see the truth of this from our own experience.

When one repeatedly shuts a particular door by an act of willfulness, there may, in fact there always does, come a time when the door no longer opens. The book of Romans makes this point another way: "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient." (Romans 1:28)

Stubborn, willful sin leads inevitably to a state in which God's beckoning grace stops beckoning, and a person is "left unto himself, to kick against the pricks, to persecute the saints, and to fight against God." (D&C 121:38) This latter-day scripture gives the clearest picture possible of how "will not" becomes "cannot." Verse 37 speaks of the "heavens withdraw[ing]" and the "Spirit of the Lord [being] grieved" and then "withdrawn."

"And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, *that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.*" (D&C 84:46) When a man finally *stops* hearkening, the light goes away. Daniel 5:20 shows us King Nebuchadnezzar: "his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride." So is it possible to say of such a one that God hardened his heart? God does, in fact, act by withdrawing His spirit and "[giving] them over" to a harder and harder state, but such an action is always preceded by the individual's choice to turn away.

This is the case with Pharaoh. His willful, stubborn pride began his spiral downward. God acts by sending plagues and at some point, God acts by withdrawing any softening grace that might otherwise have assisted in repentance. The story of Pharaoh's hard heart is a monument to the way in which pride and selfish sin destroy a man from within. In this, Pharaoh is once more a type of Lucifer, and helps answer the question, "how art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" (Isaiah 14:12)

Thunder, Fire and Hail from Heaven: The Seventh Plague

Moses warns Pharaoh that the next day a terrific storm of hail, lightening and thunder will strike the country. He graciously extends an offer of protection to all who will move their stock in from the fields to a protecting building. This warning enables all those who believe Moses to save their animals and servants.

The thunder, hail and fire are the most dramatic plague and warning from God yet given. Pharaoh must have been awed and terrified by such a display, and in a sense, he had no choice but to immediately send for Moses and Aaron, even saying (9:27) "I have sinned this time: the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked." Egypt's gods of the sky and storms (Nut and Set) are no help, and he can see his own destruction staring him in the face. He is now forced to negotiate, as he supposes, with Israel's god. When forced by the circumstances to seek Moses' help, he distributes blame to "his people," perhaps acknowledging the weakness of the national gods that were supposed to be the protectors of his people.

Pharaoh is convinced enough of God's power to quickly ask Moses to entreat Jehovah to abate the storm. Moses agrees to do this so that Pharaoh "may know how the earth is the LORD's." Pharaoh does not yet "get it." He supposes this to be a struggle between the gods of his nation versus the stronger god of another nation. This shows Pharaoh's misunderstanding of God's real identity. The actual struggle is between the true God and no gods, since all the Egyptian gods are nothing more than superstitions, used by priests and kings to prop up false

religious systems that keep them in power. Even Moses knows that the seeming change in Pharaoh signifies nothing, for he says to him, "I know that ye will not yet fear the Lord God." He is right about this, for as soon as the immediate danger is passed, Pharaoh and his servants harden their hearts again.

A Plague of Locusts-The Eighth Plague

It is not certain how much time passes between each of the plagues of Exodus, but some commentators feel the progression could have taken 6 months to a year. The plague of hail destroyed the early crops of flax and barley we are told (9:31,32) but not the later crops of wheat and rye. Sometime later, when those crops were up and growing well, perhaps giving Pharaoh and his people a sense of security, Moses is sent back to him with an ominous new threat—locusts—if Pharaoh will still refuse God's request. He is specifically told that they will eat every green and growing thing, leaving nothing. This time, Moses' message causes panic among the king's advisors and they are frightened enough to confront Pharaoh and beg for Egypt's sake to let Israel go. Their desperation is revealed in their cry, "Knowest thou not that Egypt is destroyed!"

They apparently convince Pharaoh to try and stave off this disaster by bargaining with Moses. So he pretends to give in. "You may go to serve your God. But only your men." The women and the children are not to go. However God was not to be bargained with. The locusts descend and eat "every herb of the land, even all that the hail hath left."

Darkness Descends-the Ninth Plague

After the locusts Pharaoh sends for Moses in a panic. There is certainly no doubt at this point that he acknowledges the power of God. He professes repentance and once more asks Moses to pray for deliverance from the locusts. Moses does so and the locusts are blown away by a mighty wind. Pharaoh's repentance, however, seems to blow away as well. He reneges on his promise to let the people go. So again without warning, God sends, through Moses, the terrifying sign of thick darkness. For three days the Egyptians could not light fire or even "see one another."

The greatest God in the Egyptian pantheon was Ra, the sun god. He was considered the king of the Gods, and the ultimate protector of the Pharaoh and his dynasty. He was the god of light who caused the sun to rise each day and brought glory to Egypt. To the Egyptians, this awful darkness must have seemed to extinguish all that they had believed was true about the world. If Moses and his God were stronger than Ra, then they had no hope. "We be all dead men," was their lament. (Ex.12:33)

When the darkness lifts, Pharaoh sends once again for Moses, and once again, realizes he has no choice but to bargain. The choice of giving in to God's will completely does not seem to even enter his mind however. He still thinks he is at the bargaining table and is trying to get something out of the deal. He will finally concede to letting every Israelite go, including the women and children, but insists they must leave behind their livestock.

Perhaps this is his way of attempting to get something back in exchange for letting his slaves go, something with which to rebuild his ravaged country. Perhaps he thinks this is a generous offer and that he has made as much of a concession as a Pharaoh could reasonably be expected to make by this latest offer. After all, he is

greatly humbling himself before Moses, a man whom he despises, by conceding so much. His pride demands that he retain some little shred of power or victory, by setting the condition of the cattle staying behind. Pharaoh is used to the bargaining process with heads of state and ministers. Surely it is reasonable to expect to get *something* in return for letting the whole nation of Israel leave.

A Final Parting

But in these negotiations, Moses represents God himself, and God does not bargain away His commands in concessions to the power of earthly kings. Moses refuses Pharaoh's last, best offer. He says no. They are leaving and they are going to take all of their livestock and "leave not a hoof behind." At this point Pharaoh is forced to silently concede that there is nothing he can do to stop them.

In the bitterest fury Pharaoh orders Moses to leave, warning that if he ever sees his face again he will kill him. Moses agrees that there is no more reason to meet. "I will see thy face again no more." Chapter 10 ends on this ominous note. It makes one think of Nephi's lament in the Book of Mormon: "I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men." (2 Nephi 32:7)

¹ The final two compromises were to leave the women and children behind, and finally, to leave their livestock behind.

² Jews sacrificed sheep, which were sacred in Egypt. Khnum, the ancient, ram-headed god who guarded the Nile, supposedly created men and women with the clay silt that flooded Egypt each year. Jews also sacrificed bulls and cows, both sacred representations of Egyptian gods. The bull was sacred to Osiris, and the Apis was a living deified bull (actually series of bulls) that lived in a golden temple until their natural death, after which they were embalmed. The cow was the sacred representation of Hathor, a very powerful Egyptian goddess of love, beauty, sexuality, music, women, children and childbirth. The ram, cow and bull were never sacrificed on an altar; this would have been a sacrilege of the most extreme kind. Egyptian religion deified animals. Hebrew worship never did.

³ Please note that later plagues kill more animals and some have wondered where they came from if all had died of disease. But this disease did not wipe out *all* of the livestock of the Egyptians, only those "in the field."

⁴ Think of the debacle of the worship of the golden calf and the drunken orgy that surrounded it which polluted the children of Israel later. They were imitating the religious practices they had seen in Egypt.

⁵ J. R. Dummelow, Commentary on the Holy Bible (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), p. 53.