

HANDOUT TEN PLAGUES

Meaning and Purpose

1. Nile River turns to blood
2. Frogs
3. Lice
4. Beasts
5. Livestock disease
6. Boils
7. Hail
8. Locusts
9. Darkness
10. Death of the First Born

The **Ten Plagues** of Egypt—also known as the **Plagues of Egypt**, or the **Biblical Plagues**—are described in **Exodus** chapters 7–12. The plagues were ten disasters sent upon Egypt by God to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves from the bondage and oppression they had endured in Egypt for 200 years. When God sent Moses to deliver the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, He promised to show His wonders as confirmation of Moses' authority (Exodus 3:20). This confirmation was to serve at least two purposes

1. to show the Israelites that the God of their fathers was alive and worthy of their worship
2. to show the Egyptians that their gods were nothing.

The Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt for about 200 years, and in that time, had lost faith in the God of their fathers. They believed He existed and worshiped Him, but they doubted that He could, or would, break the yoke of their bondage.

The Egyptians, like many pagan cultures, worshiped a wide variety of nature-gods, and attributed to their powers the natural phenomena they saw in the world around them. There was a god of the sun, of the river, of childbirth, of crops, etc.... The whole essence of idolatry is the belief that every force in nature has a god that controls it. Events like the annual flooding of the Nile, which fertilized their croplands, were evidences of their gods' powers and good will. In Egypt, they worshipped the Nile god, sun god, cat god, sheep god, etc.... When Moses approached Pharaoh, demanding that he let the people go, Pharaoh responded by saying, "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2). Thus began the challenge to show whose God was more powerful. The Ten Plagues are a demonstration that God alone controls nature, all the physical world, and there is nothing outside of His control.

The obvious questions we must ask when we examine the Plagues, is why? Why did God choose to set the Jewish people free through this very long, drawn-out process? If He wanted, God, the all-powerful being that He is, could have made all the Egyptians drop dead on the first encounter with Moses or He could have frozen them in place, then all the Jews could have packed up and left in five minutes. This devastation continues for over a year (Talmud – Ediyos 2:10).

To explain why the Ten Plagues had to be, we need to first explain the Jewish view of miracles. Each plague is an open miracle, because each one represents a fantastic manipulation of nature. The first point to focus on is that all existence – all the processes of the physical universe – is a miracle. Judaism holds that nature does not act independently of God, but at the same time, God created the laws of nature and does not like to interfere with them. God is certainly capable of doing whatever He likes, but does not like to play around with the physical world and its workings. Therefore, most miracles are natural phenomena with awesomely good timing. But to this rule, the Ten Plagues are a notable exception. The Ten Plagues are a clear example of God flipping the laws of nature on its end. Also, the Ten Plagues happened to the Egyptians, but not the Jews, although they were living in the same land.

1) The Nile River Turns To Blood

The Nile River was very important to the Egyptians. There was very little rain in Egypt, and the Egyptians were able to use the water from the annual overflow of the Nile to grow food. They felt like the river sustained life so they worshiped the river as a god. The god Khnum was sometimes known as lord of the cool waters. He was believed to be self-created and the creator of other Egyptian gods.

Turning the Nile to blood, was a judgment against Hapi, the god of the Nile, Isis, goddess of the Nile, and Khnum, guardian of the Nile. The Nile was also believed to be the bloodstream of Osiris, who was reborn each year when the river flooded and by turning the Nile to blood, the Egyptians would have interpreted this as the failure of Osiris to return. The river, which formed the basis of daily life and the national economy, was devastated, as millions of fish died in the river and the water was unusable. Pharaoh was told "By this you will know that I am the LORD...."

Pharaoh would go to the Nile in the morning for meditation. God told Moses to meet Pharaoh at the river so that Moses could show Gods' power over the Nile. The true God of the Hebrews in His first plague turned the Nile River into blood to show His superiority over the Egyptian gods. Ancient Egyptians considered red to be a color of evil.

2) Frogs

God had just shown his superiority over the Nile by changing it to blood and killing the fish that were in it. Now He was going to bring out frogs from the Nile. This would show that God could pick and choose what lives and dies in the Nile.

The Egyptians respected the frogs because they helped control the undesirable insects that appeared when the Nile flooded. God showed that even the timid creatures no longer feared the Egyptians by allowing them to be everywhere, including in the presence of the leaders and on their physical bodies. The plague was so bad that Pharaoh agreed to let Israel worship their God if Moses would just get rid of the frogs. The frogs that the Egyptians could do nothing about were soon found dead in piles after Moses prayed to God for an end to the plague. These piles would serve as a visual reminder of God's power for the people of Egypt as they cleaned up this smelly mess.

This was a judgment against Heqet, the frog-headed goddess of birth. After the Nile flooded and receded, pools of water were left behind teeming with Frogs. The frogs were a sign of fertility as farmers would know it was soon time to plant crops. Capital Punishment was the crime for killing a frog. God had the frogs invade every part of the temples (of other gods) and homes of the Egyptians. The frogs became viewed as disgusting and when they died, their stinking bodies were heaped up in offensive piles all through the land.

3) Lice (Gnats)

Geb was the Earth god, and this plague may have been intended to show God's superiority over him and the physical land itself since the plague came from the dust of the Earth. At the end of this plague God had shown His total superiority over Earth and water and things that live in the water.

This plague was not targeted at any one Egyptian god, but against all of them. Egyptian priests had to be without any physical blemish (they shaved all their hair, were circumcised, bathed frequently, and wore white linen). These supposed "pure ones" performed daily rituals of worship to their gods. But bites and infestation rendered the entire priesthood unclean; their prayers to the respective gods would have gone unheeded because of their impurity. In this way, Yahweh shut down all practice of religion in Egypt. Unlike the previous plagues, the magicians were unable to duplicate this one, and declared to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God".

4) Beasts (Flies)

Here God shows His superiority over all animals on land. This plague was a judgment on either Re or Uatchit, who were both depicted as flies. In this plague, God clearly distinguished between the Israelites and the Egyptians, as no swarms of flies bothered the areas where the Israelites lived.

5) Livestock Disease

The **fifth** plague, the death of livestock, was a judgment on the goddess Hathor and the god Apis, who were both depicted as cattle. As with the previous plague, God protected His people from the plague, while the cattle of the Egyptians all died. God was steadily destroying the economy of Egypt, while showing His ability to protect and provide for those who obeyed Him. Pharaoh even sent investigators (Exodus 9:7) to find out if the Israelites were suffering along with the Egyptians, but the result was a hardening of his heart against them.

But the most prominent Egyptian deity defeated by this plague was Apis, a bull representing Ptah. At any time, there was only one sacred Apis bull. Upon its death, it would be mummified and replaced by another Apis bull, supposedly identified by 28 distinctive features that marked it out as a god. The bull was kept near Ptah's temple, fed delicacies, and given as many heifers as it wished. At this plague, the reigning Apis bull died, together with all potential replacements. And Ptah had no answer.

6) Boils

With the coming of the boils, God made some very powerful statements. One is found in the miracle itself. When Moses threw a couple of handfuls of soot in the air, it became enough to cover all the Egyptians. God can make a little go a long way. We also see God sending this plague to both man and beast. You may ask why there were any cattle left after the last plague. It was because God only allowed the disease to come to the cattle that were in the field. You may ask why soot. Soot would actually help to heal a boil. Once again God is showing He rules over the ordinary laws of nature. This plague seemed to affect all of Egypt's cattle. The Egyptian medicine god Thoth couldn't cure these boils, and Pharaoh's counsel pleaded with Pharaoh yet his heart remained hard.

This plague was a judgment against several gods over health and disease (Sekhmet, Sunu, and Isis). This time, the Bible says that the magicians "could not stand before Moses because of the boils." Clearly, these religious leaders were powerless against the God of Israel. The Egyptian gods were unable to deliver Egypt from the God of Israel.

7) Hail

Before God sent the last three plagues, Pharaoh was given a special message from God. These plagues would be more severe than the others, and they were designed to convince Pharaoh and all the people "that there is none like me in all the earth" (Exodus 9:14). Pharaoh was even told that he was placed in his position by God, so that God could show His power and declare His name through all the earth (v. 16). As an example of His grace, God warned Pharaoh to gather whatever cattle and crops remained from the previous plagues and shelter them from the coming storm. Some of Pharaoh's servants heeded the warning (v. 20), while others did not. Now by forewarning Egypt, God is saying, "get prepared for the next plague. Fight if off if you can. You know it is coming, so perhaps you can convince the god of the sky (Nut) you worship to stop it before it starts."

The **seventh** plague, hail, attacked Nut, the sky goddess, Osiris, the crop fertility god, and Set, the storm god. This hail was unlike any that had been seen before. It was accompanied by a fire which ran along the ground, and everything left out in the open was devastated by the hail and fire. Again, the children of Israel were miraculously protected, and no hail damaged anything in their lands.

HAIL IS ICE, BUT GOD HAS MADE IT TO BE ON FIRE

8) Locust

Before God brought the next plague, He told Moses that the Israelites would be able to tell their children of the things they had seen God do in Egypt and how it showed them God's power. The **eighth** plague, locusts, again focused on Nut, Osiris, and Set. The later crops, wheat and rye, which had survived the hail, were now devoured by the swarms of locusts. There would be no harvest in Egypt that year.

The locust plague was incredibly powerful. Here God shows that He is in total control of the animals that live in the air. This completes His show of authority over all animals. Those that live in water, those that walk the Earth, and those that fly. The East wind that blew in was probably from Asia, a natural habitat for the locust. God showed that as easy as He can bring them into Egypt He could kill them. They were all drowned in the Red Sea. (He allowed some of the frogs to live at the end of that plague). The locust ate up whatever damaged crops were left in the fields. Egypt had been known for its great agriculture. This is what brought the Jews to Egypt in the first place. Soon the Jews would be leaving Egypt but not until there were no crops and very little cattle left. Pharaoh may have known what the results would be if the locust remained in Egypt and deposited their larva in the land. The next agriculture season could be effected the same way.

9) Darkness

The **ninth** plague, darkness, was aimed at the sun god, Re, who was symbolized by Pharaoh himself. For three days, the land of Egypt was smothered with an unearthly darkness, but the homes of the Israelites had light.

This was by far the scariest plague. When the darkness came, it was very dark. So dark that no one could move nor could you see your hand in front of your face. Wherever you were when the plague struck, it was where you stayed for about three days. Tradition has it that there was moisture in the air and that candles or lamps could not be lit. This was another plague that only affected the Egyptians and not the Jews living in Goshen.

This was an attack on the biggest, strongest most powerful Egyptian god, the sun god Re (Ra). Egyptians believed that in the beginning Re was alone. He was known as the god of the sun. The sun was actually considered his eye. He impregnated himself and bore the air. There was no other god so powerful and, at one time, he had over 50 different versions of his name. With the darkness plague came God's statement, "I am in control."

God had overcome the sun, and no one could even move it was so dark. This was probably enough to convince everyone but Pharaoh, who still had a hardened heart. Moses must have told Israel in advance that this plague was coming along with the redemption. By the time that this plague was over, God had shown His superiority over the Egyptian gods, over the water and land, over its inhabitants, and now over its atmosphere. There weren't any Egyptian gods that could compete with the Hebrew God, and everyone knew it. The slaves knew they were about to be redeemed, and Egypt feared for its survival. Still, Pharaoh would not keep his word and free the slaves. God is also teaching us that without His light, we are all in spiritual darkness.

Blood, frogs, and lice demonstrated God's authority over water and land.

Beasts of the wilderness (flies), the cattle disease, and boils or blisters demonstrated God's authority over the inhabitants who lived on the land.

Hail, locust, and darkness demonstrated God's authority over the atmosphere that surrounded both the land and the people who lived upon it.

DARKNESS SO DENSE, NO ONE CAN SEE OR MOVE

10) Death Of The First Born

The **tenth** and last plague, the death of the firstborn males, was a judgment on Isis, the protector of children. In this plague, God was teaching the Israelites a deep spiritual lesson which pointed to Christ. Unlike the other plagues, which the Israelites survived by virtue of their identity as God's people, this plague required an act of faith by them. God commanded each family to take an unblemished male lamb and kill it. The blood of the lamb was to be smeared on the top and sides of their doorways, and the lamb was to be roasted and eaten that night. Any family that did not follow God's instructions would suffer in the last plague. God described how He would send the death angel through the land of Egypt, with orders to slay the firstborn male in every household, whether human or animal. The only protection was the blood of the lamb on the door. When the angel saw the blood, he would pass over that house and leave it untouched (Exodus 12:23). This is where the term "Passover" comes from. It is a memorial of that night in ancient Egypt when God delivered His people from bondage.

By the time the Israelites left Egypt, they had a clear picture of God's power, God's protection, and God's plan for them. For those who were willing to believe, they had convincing evidence that they served the true and living God. Sadly, many still failed to believe, which led to other trials and lessons by God. The result for the Egyptians and the other ancient people of the region was a dread of the God of Israel. Pharaoh once again hardened his heart and sent his chariots after the Israelites. When God opened a way through the Red Sea for the Israelites, then drowned all of Pharaoh's armies there, the power of Egypt was crushed, and the fear of God spread through the surrounding nations (Joshua 2:9-11). This was the very purpose that God declared at the beginning. We can still look back on these events today to confirm our faith in, and our fear of, this true and living God, the judge of all the earth.

You may ask yourself, why did God only take the first born? God claims the first born as His own. He claims the first born offspring, the first born cattle, the first fruits of your crops, and money. In Egypt that day, God claimed what He felt was His. The idea is that we have nothing without God so give back to Him first. While the Egyptians had to give up their first born, the Hebrew first born were redeemed, that is bought back.

God could have freed Israel with just one plague but chose to use ten instead. This is because He wanted more opportunity for His actions to be remembered, more opportunity to prove that He was lord over all the gods in Egypt, not just one of them. God knew that the story of Passover would remain alive, in fact, He commands the retelling of it every year.