



Bible 100: The Plagues, A Summary

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The Plagues, A Summary of Exodus 7-12

The ten plagues described in Exodus can be read as literal miraculous historical events, the intensification of natural occurrences, or as a literary device moving the story forward. The plagues come in pairs: two from the Nile River (blood and frogs), two involving insects (gnats and swarms), two epidemics, two that destroy crops, and the final two are darkness and death.

There is a sense of building destruction and anxiety as we move through the plagues. God uses the plagues to bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt, *and* to demonstrate his faithfulness to the Israelites.

Plague #1: Water to Blood (Exodus 7:14-24)

In the first plague, all water in Egypt, including the Nile River, turned to blood. (Exodus 7:17, 19) The Egyptians worshiped a god named Hapi who they believed controlled the Nile. Egyptians also believed the Nile was the very bloodstream of one of their greatest gods, Osiris. Osiris, the son of the gods of the earth and sky (Geb and Nut), was the god of all life and the afterlife. The first plague demonstrates the powerlessness of both Hapi and Osiris.

Plague #2: Frogs (Exodus 7:25-8:11)

Seven days later Moses warns that frogs will swarm over the whole country, from the river all the way to the bedrooms of the palace. Normally the sound of croaking frogs would have been welcomed. It signaled that the annual inundation (routine flooding caused by seasonally heavy rainfall in the Ethiopian highlands¹) had passed. The silt which made the land so incredibly fertile had been deposited and the farmers could begin their work.

Frogs symbolized fertility and, therefore, life. Egyptians worshiped the goddess Heqet, who had a human body but the head of a frog. They believed she helped women in childbirth and called her the goddess of birth.

With the second plague, frogs invaded Egypt and were so numerous and problematic that Pharaoh asks Moses to pray to the Lord to remove them.

With both the first and second plagues, the Pharaoh's "magicians" used their secret arts to duplicate what Moses and Aaron did, but they were powerless to undo their work or combat the plagues. In other words, they made things worse. (Exodus 7:22, 8:7)

The plague of frogs ends when Moses prays to God, but the frogs do not vanish. Rather they die in place, "in the houses, the courtyards and the fields ... and the land stank." Exodus 8:13-14. The problem morphed from dealing with living frogs to dealing with the dead, decaying frog bodies.

Plague #3: Gnats (Exodus 8:12-15)

As the dead frogs decayed, God sent the third plague – gnats. The gnats are also described in various translations as lice, sand fleas, or mosquitoes. The gnats were so numerous it seemed every speck of dust in Egypt had turned into a tiny bug.

This plague strikes Geb, the god of the earth and father of Osiris. As the god of the earth, Geb was thought to handle the crops growing out of the earth. When Aaron stretched out his hand and "struck the dust of the earth" with his staff, gnats rose from the ground instead of healthy crops. (Exodus 8:17)

Plague #4: Swarms (Exodus 8:16-28)

The fourth plague is the plague of swarms. The literal Hebrew does not specify what swarmed, but most modern translations indicate it was beetles or flies.²

The first three plagues affected Egypt universally, but the fourth plague affects only Egyptians, stopping at the border to the land where the Hebrews lived.

The Egyptian god Khepri is a sun god, perhaps a subsidiary form of Amon-Ra who was the primary god in Egyptian culture. Ra brought light into the world and his subsidiary Khepri rolled the sun across the sky. Khepri is represented in hieroglyphs as a scarab beetle and is depicted in paintings as a man with the head of a scarab.³

The scarab beetle is a dung beetle. It works, lives, and lays its eggs in animal manure. Egyptians were keen observers of the world around them. They observed scarab beetles moving balls of dirt by rolling them, in the same way Khepri rolled the sun across the sky. Additionally, new scarabs emerged from the dung in a way that seemed spontaneous at the time. This coincided with Khepri who was self-created.

Plague #5: Pestilence (Exodus 9:1-7)

Plague number five specifically targeted Egyptian “livestock in the field.” (Exodus 9:3) The livestock owned by Israelites was untouched, but all of the Egyptian horses, donkeys, camels, herds, and flocks in the field died.

One type of animal inevitably caught in this pestilence was cattle. Many Egyptian gods were represented by animals, but perhaps the most revered of these was Apis, the bull-god. Apis was either an intermediary between Osiris and humanity or, for some Egyptians, was considered the physical form of Osiris.⁴ The God of the Israelites demonstrated supremacy over Apis by striking down all Egyptian livestock.

Plague #6: Boils (Exodus 9:8-12)

In the sixth plague, Moses threw handfuls of soot from a kiln or furnace into the air. It spread through the air and settled on humans and animals, creating hot, festering skin sores, probably black in color like the soot.

For the first time, the Pharaoh's magicians are afflicted. They were either physically or ceremonially unable to "stand before Moses because of the boils." Perhaps the magicians were in too much pain (Deuteronomy 28:27, 35), or perhaps the boils rendered them unfit for service.

Egyptians credited the goddess Sekhmet with controlling plagues and providing healing.⁵ The plague of boils affected everyone, presumably even the priests of Sekhmet called the *Sunu*.⁶

Plague #7: Hail & Fire (Exodus 9:13-35)

Immediately before plague seven, God reiterates the point of all the plagues saying, "I have let you live to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth." (Exodus 9:16) God also warns that every animal and person should be brought to a shelter because the heaviest hail *ever* is coming. Some Egyptians believed God and found shelter for their animals, workers, and slaves. Those who did not heed the warning lost it all when Moses "stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail and fire ... such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt." The storm destroyed every human, animal, plant, and tree in a field anywhere in Egypt *except* Goshen where the Israelites lived.

God has now used the Nile River, the soil, the air, and the sky to bring destruction to Pharaoh's kingdom.

The seventh plague proves the powerlessness of the goddess of the sky and mother of Osiris, Nut. Egyptians relied on her to prevent “chaos from breaking through the sky and engulfing the world.”⁷

Plague #8: Locusts (Exodus 10:1-20)

The tenth plague brings locusts to Egypt. Moses warns, correctly, that the locusts will devour anything not already destroyed by the previous plagues. God brings the locusts in on an east wind. There were so many locusts the land looked black. The locusts ate everything so that “nothing green was left, no tree, no plant in the field” anywhere in Egypt. At Pharaoh’s request, Moses prays that God remove the locusts. God brings a very strong west wind, blowing the locusts into the Red Sea.

The Egyptian gods were again silent and powerless, including Neper, the god of grain.

Plague #9: Darkness (Exodus 10:21-29)

Plague nine is the plague of darkness. For three days, it was so dark people could not see each other or where they were walking. The Israelites had light, but the Egyptians had only darkness.

This plague shows the inefficacy of the sun god Amon-Ra, the greatest of Egyptian gods.

Plague #10: Death of the Firstborn (Exodus 11-12)

God brings the tenth, and final, plague to every Egyptian household, including the Pharaoh. At midnight on the predicted day, God “struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.” (Exodus 12:29)

The Plagues

This plague also brought the beginning of the Jewish calendar because God told Moses to mark this month as the first month of the year.

The Israelites were spared this plague. God told the Israelites to spread the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their houses. As God moved through Egypt, destroying the firstborns, he passed over (hence Passover) Israelite homes with blood on the doorposts.

In addition to proving God's dominion over life and death, this plague struck the Egyptian gods in another way. Every firstborn in Egypt was dedicated to an Egyptian god. This plague deprived every Egyptian deity of what had been pledged to them.⁸

This is an excerpt from the Bible 100 Small Group Study. For more information, visit www.bethdemme.com/Bible100 or e-mail info@bethdemme.com.

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