

WHAT YAHWEH REVEALED THROUGH THE 10 PLAGUES

The Book of Exodus records the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt; yet it is much more about God entering into a covenant relationship with His chosen people. As such, God had to reveal Himself to Israel, not just so that they could know more about God, but so that they would know Him personally as their covenant God.

The ten plagues were not merely the means by which God wrested Israel from the hands of their Egyptian taskmasters. Through them, God revealed who He is and what He is like. **He revealed that Yahweh is God – not the Egyptian deities.**

Egypt had a whole pantheon of gods which they worshipped through an elaborate system of religion. Israel's enculturation over time saw them embracing these Egyptian gods. Ezekiel 20:7-9 describes a jealous Yahweh telling Israel to discard the idols of Egypt, but they rebelled stubbornly against Him. Hence, God forcefully demonstrated to Israel the utter impotence of the Egyptian gods, and the fundamental difference between God and them.

The ten plagues were not random calamities inflicted upon the Egyptians; rather, they were carefully crafted to demonstrate Yahweh's might over the Egyptian deities. (Numbers 33:4 *"On their God's also, Yahweh executed judgments."*)

1. The Nile. The Nile was the lifeline of Egypt, which revered Hapi as the spirit of the Nile and its dynamic essence. The Nile bred many of Egypt's religious beliefs, and a number of deities were associated with the river. Khnum was the preserver of the varied sources of the Nile, Neith was the goddess who watched over the *lates*, the largest fish in the Nile, while Hathor did the same for the *chromise*, another fish in the river. The turning of water into blood showed up Khnum's powerlessness, while the resulting death of the fish proved Neith's and Hathor's impotence. Furthermore, the annual inundation of the Nile represented the resurrection of Osiris, the god of the underworld. The blood waters would have been interpreted by the Egyptians as a failure of Osiris to return to life.

2. Frogs. The frog was the symbol of Heket, the goddess of fertility and childbirth. Annually, as the Nile's inundation receded, it blanketed the land with rich alluvial deposits, making it fertile. The recession also left behind pools of water where frogs would teem. Thus, the frogs were a welcome sign to farmers that their fields were again ready for cultivation. The frog was so revered that capital punishment awaited anyone who killed a frog. This plague turned the frog from a symbol of fertility to an object of disgust. It was difficult for anyone not to kill a frog, and its ubiquitous presence would have defiled all the other Egyptian temples erected for other deities. Heket would have ceased to be a venerated deity.

3. Gnats. The plague of gnats 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.

4. Flies. The Ichneumon fly has the habit of depositing its eggs on other living things by embedding them into their skins; the larvae then feeds on that animal as it grows. This fly is regarded as a symbol of the god Uatchit, and is thus revered by the Egyptians. However, the effect of this plague was so oppressive and grievous (Exodus 8:24, *"the land was ruined because of swarms of flies"*) that the Egyptians would have turned against the god of the flies.

5. Cattle. This plague killed off all forms of livestock - horses, camels, and sheep. Besides crippling the economy, the plague also spoke eloquently against several Egyptian gods. Mnevis was a sacred bull associated with Amun-Re, the sun-god. Hathor, the goddess of beauty, joy and love, took the form of a heifer. 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. The goddess Sekhmet was believed to have the power to start and stop epidemics. The Egyptians were so fearful of rapidly spreading diseases that they had a priesthood, the Sunu, dedicated to her. Right before Pharaoh, Sekhmet was proven impotent, as the soot Moses cast skyward fell as dust and caused painful boils to break out on all Egyptians (Exodus 9:8-10). This time, even Pharaoh's magicians were unable to appear before him because of their debilitation (Exodus 9:11). This plague was also targeted at Serapis, a god of healing, and at Imhotep, the god of medicine. They were unable to deliver Egypt from the God of Israel.

7. Hail. This violence raining upon the land of Egypt from the sky assaulted the realms of Nut, Isis and Seth. Nut was the sky goddess, who could do nothing to hold back such destruction coming from above. Isis and Seth were responsible for abundant agricultural produce, who were also jointly unable to restrain the hand of Yahweh.

8. Locusts. Little is known today about the Egyptian locust god. Its name is not preserved to us. Nevertheless, it is known that locusts were much-feared in Egypt, and peasants habitually supplicated their locust god.

9. Darkness. In the penultimate plague, Amun-Re, the sun god, foremost amongst Egyptian deities, was blotted out in thick darkness (Exodus 10:21). Amun-Re was Egypt's national god. To defeat Amun-Re was to strike at the heart of Egyptian religion and to triumph over the entire pantheon. Sundry lesser sun deities were also shamed. Atum was god of the setting sun. Khepre was a form of Amun-Re, often depicted as a beetle. Horus, the son of Amun-Re, was often symbolized by a winged sun disc. The prestige of these gods (as well as associated gods of the moon and sky) was dealt a fatal blow by this plague of deep darkness.

10. Firstborn. Finally, Pharaoh himself was personally humbled. He was supposed to be Amun-Re's physical son and vicar on earth. Upon his death, the Pharaoh was deemed to return to his father in the heavens. The Pharaoh's firstborn, who should have in time reigned as god, was slain. Having dealt with the Egyptian gods, Yahweh now dealt with the man who was thought to be divine.

By this time, it must have been abundantly clear to the Israelites that the Egyptian deities they venerated were not gods at all, not by any stretch of the imagination. **Yahweh is God – not the Egyptian deities.**

Adapted from Fishers Magazine #198, The 'Fisherman of Christ' Fellowship, Singapore.