

Exodus 8:20-9:7

Introduction

In the account of the first plague, we read:

- ✓ Exodus 7:14–15 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “...Go to Pharaoh *in the morning, as he is going out to the water*. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him.”

And now, after the water of the Nile turned to blood, and the swarms of frogs that covered the land, and the gnats which were as many as the dust of the earth – now we read in chapter eight, verses 20-21:

I. Exodus 8:20 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “Rise up early *in the morning* and present yourself to Pharaoh, *as he goes out to the water*, and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of insects on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of insects, and also the ground on which they stand.”’”

And so we begin round two. The word for “swarms” here is not the word for “swarms” that we saw in the plague of frogs. That word could also be applied to people, as in “the people of Israel were fruitful and swarmed.” (1:7) But here, *swarms of insects* is all just *one* word in the Hebrew. Virtually all translations say “swarms of flies,” but no one really knows what kind of insects these were, and so we can’t be sure they were flying insects. If they were flies, we wouldn’t know what kind of flies. So it seems best just to translate, “swarms of insects.” (cf. Holladay)

Notice that the houses of the Egyptians would be filled with these swarms of insects, and also the *ground* on which they stood. I wonder if this might especially imply the creeping, crawling kind of insects (as opposed to the flying insects/gnats in the third plague)? Some people suggest that these insects might have included, or even consisted entirely of the scarab beetle. (cf. Currid; YLT) “To the Ancient Egyptians, [the scarab beetle] was a symbol of Khepri, the early morning manifestation of the sun god Ra, from an analogy between the beetle’s behaviour of rolling a ball of dung across the ground and Khepri’s task of rolling the sun across the sky. They accordingly held [this beetle] to be sacred.” (Wikipedia) [See page 9] “Excavations of ancient Egyptian sites have yielded images of the scarab in bone, ivory, stone, Egyptian faience, and precious metals... The scarab was of prime significance in the funerary cult of ancient Egypt. Scarabs, generally, though not always, were cut from green stone, and placed on the chest of the deceased.” (Wikipedia) So were these “sacred beetles” the insects that now carpeted the ground and swarmed up the bodies of the Egyptians, and the walls of their houses?

Let’s skip for a moment to the next plague, where instead of using created things to strike the Egyptians, Yahweh will strike the created things themselves.

II. Exodus 9:1–3 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, “Let my people go, that they may serve me. For if you

refuse to let them go and still hold them, behold, the hand of the LORD will fall with a very severe plague upon your livestock that are in the field, the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.”””

The ancient Egyptians were especially famous for their worship of horned livestock like the bull (Apis, Mnevis) and the cow (Hathor). (See pages 10-11) The Egyptian god, Khnum, was depicted with the head of a ram. (See page 11) So in this fifth plague, many commentators see another specific attack against these specific Egyptian gods. Now, of course, it wasn't *just* the horned cows, and bulls, and rams that would be affected by this plague, but also the horses, and donkeys, and camels – every different kind of livestock. Just in and of itself this would have been a *huge* blow to Egypt. Livestock were *essential* just to *living* and *surviving* in these ancient cultures (not to mention many cultures today).

But again, was there more to the plague than this? Was this plague, too, a specific polemic, or argument against the so-called gods of Egypt? We'll reflect more on this when we come to the ninth plague – the plague of darkness. For right now, it's just something to be always keeping in the forefront of our minds. Meanwhile, let's go back again to the fourth plague and pick up again with what Yahweh told Moses to say to Pharaoh.

III. Exodus 8:22 — “But on that day [when I send the swarming insects] I will set apart the land of Goshen... so that no swarms of insects shall be there.”

So here we'll have yet another miraculous sign of Yahweh's sovereignty over the creation *that Egypt worshiped!* God will command the swarms of insects to fill the land of Egypt, and yet refrain from crossing any of the boundaries of Goshen – which was *within* the land of Egypt.

Now insects don't know anything about ethnic or political borders. They don't read the signs, or recognize the landmarks, or pay attention to maps. If the Egyptians wouldn't be able to keep these insects out of their houses, then we can surely ask how anyone could possibly hope to keep them out of their “yard”? And yet the Lord, Yahweh, has “set apart” the land of Goshen, not with walls or screens, or any other kind of natural barrier, but simply by the power of His own will and *word* of command. And *since* He has *set apart* the land of Goshen, *therefore* “no swarms of insects shall be there.” And so it happened just as God had spoken. Moses writes in verse twenty-four:

IV. Exodus 8:24 — And the LORD did so. There came great swarms of insects into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants' houses. Throughout all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by the swarms of insects.

Notice the clear statements that the insects came into the house *of Pharaoh* and into *his servants' houses*. Of course, there's no mention of any insects invading the houses of the Israelites. But then notice the reference to “*all* the land of Egypt” – “throughout all the land of Egypt the land was ruined by the swarms of insects.” Apparently, “all the land of Egypt” means all the land of Egypt *except for Goshen*. And the same goes for *at least* two other places where “all the land of Egypt” obviously means all the land of Egypt *except for Goshen*. (9:22, 24-25 & 9:26; 10:22 & 10:23)

So in light of this, we might ask about the plagues up to this point. Was the land of Goshen also “set apart” in the first set of three plagues (the blood, the frogs, and the gnats), even though these plagues otherwise affected “all the land of Egypt”? (7:19, 21; 8:2, 16-17; cf. 9:9; 10:14-15) Moses never says so explicitly, but notice what he *does* say:

- ✓ Exodus 7:21, 24 — The fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that *the Egyptians* could not drink water from the Nile... All *the Egyptians* dug along the Nile for water to drink, for *they* could not drink the water of the Nile.
- ✓ Exodus 8:3–4 (cf. 8:9, 11) — The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into *your* [Pharaoh’s] house and into *your* bedroom and on *your* bed and into the houses of *your servants* and *your people*... The frogs shall come up *on you* and *on your people* and *on all your servants*.

When we come to the sixth plague – the plague of boils – Moses doesn’t tell us specifically about any distinction being made between the land of Egypt and the land of Goshen, but notice what he does say:

- ✓ Exodus 9:11 — And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all *the Egyptians*.

And the same thing goes for the eighth plague – the plague of locusts. There’s never any explicit mention of a distinction, but God’s warning to Pharaoh seems clear enough:

- ✓ Exodus 10:4–6 — If you refuse to let my people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country... and they shall eat every tree *of yours* that grows in the field, and they shall fill *your houses* and the houses of all *your servants* and of all *the Egyptians*...

Even in these plagues where Moses isn’t actively emphasizing the point, it seems clear enough that none of these plagues (plagues 1, 2, 6, 8) touched the land of Goshen. In chapter eleven, the Lord will say to Moses:

- ✓ Exodus 11:1 — “Yet one plague more I will bring *upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt [the Egyptians]*.”

Surely, this implies very *strongly* that from the very beginning to the very end, the land of Goshen was set apart and spared from all of Yahweh’s plagues.

So then why does Moses (and/or God!) wait until the fourth plague to say this explicitly? Part of this may be just to avoid monotonous repetition of exactly the same thing nine times in a row (there’s other variety among the plagues as well; cf. Stuart). But *along with this*, I think, is just the practicality of emphasizing specific points in specific places. There are *many* different theological lessons that these plagues communicate very powerfully. And we have just such a lesson right here in the “*setting apart*” of the land of Goshen so that it remains untouched by the plagues. It just so happens that this is as good a place as any to highlight this theme and bring it to the forefront, so that now it occupies our *careful* attention.

What is the theological point in the “setting apart” of the land of Goshen? What do we learn about God, and what is the difference that God wants this lesson to make in our lives? Of course, one thing this hammers home yet again is Yahweh’s total and complete sovereignty over the creation that the Egyptians worshiped. Here is yet another proof of the vanity and futility of all the small g “gods” that men have ever worshiped. But what is it that makes the land of Goshen any different from the rest of Egypt? What is it about the land of Goshen, that God should choose to set *that* land apart? Yahweh is explicitly clear. He says in verses 22-23:

V. Exodus 8:22–23 — “But on that day I will *set apart* the land of Goshen, ***where my people dwell***... that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the land.¹ Thus I will *put a division between my people and your people*.”

So, of course, the point is not the land of Goshen itself. That may seem self-evident, but hopefully not so self-evident that we miss the power and beauty of the truth being communicated. There is nothing about the land itself that could explain why it’s spared the plagues that come on all the rest of the land of Egypt. The point, rather, is *who* happens to be living in the land of Goshen! Four centuries earlier, another Pharaoh had said to Jacob:

✓ Genesis 47:6, 27 — “The land of Egypt is before you. Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land. Let them settle in the land of Goshen.” ... Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen.

And now, centuries later, God brings His plagues on all the land of Egypt, while miraculously sparing His people, whose land was *in the midst* of Egypt. God brings His plagues on all the Egyptians, while miraculously sparing His people who were living *in the midst* of the Egyptians. If we skip ahead once more to the fifth plague (the death of the livestock), we’ll find that it builds on this same theme, and emphasizes the same point, if possible, even more forcefully than here.

VI. Exodus 9:4–7 — “But ***the LORD will make a distinction*** between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, ***so that nothing of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die***.” And the LORD set a time, saying, “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.” And the next day the LORD did this thing. All the livestock of the Egyptians died, ***but not one of the livestock of the people of Israel died***. And Pharaoh sent, ***and behold, not one of the livestock of Israel was dead***. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.

Three times, the same point is driven home: “***nothing*** of all that belongs to the people of Israel shall die... ***not one*** of the livestock of the people of Israel died... ***not one*** of the livestock of Israel was dead.” And why? Because Yahweh made a “***distinction***” between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt – or as He says in verse twenty-three, “between *My people and your people*.” After this fifth plague, Moses specifically highlights and emphasizes this same theme twice more. In the seventh plague, God will send hail on all the land of Egypt.

¹ I translate “land [of Egypt]” here (versus earth) in light of the other clear references to a *specific land* in verses 22, 24, & 25. (cf. Enns)

- ✓ Exodus 9:26 — *Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were*, was there no hail.

In the ninth plague, there will be darkness in all the land of Egypt.

- ✓ Exodus 10:23 — But *all the people of Israel* had light *where they lived*.

We've seen that these plagues are signs of God's sovereignty over the creation that the Egyptians worshiped. But, of course, we can't miss the obvious fact that they are also the instruments of God's punishment, and His wrath, and His judgement on Egypt itself. The Lord says to Moses in chapter ten:

- ✓ Exodus 10:1–2 — “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson *how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians.*”

Listen to the Psalmist in Psalm seventy-eight:

- ✓ Psalm 78:43–49 — [Yahweh] performed his signs in Egypt and his marvels in the fields of Zoan. He turned *their* rivers to blood, *so that they* could not drink of their streams. He sent *among them* swarms of flies, *which devoured them*, and frogs, *which destroyed them*. He gave *their crops* to the destroying locust and the fruit of *their labor* to the locust. *He destroyed their vines* with hail and *their sycamores* with frost. *He gave over their cattle* to the hail and *their flocks* to thunderbolts. He let loose *on them* his *burning anger, wrath, indignation*, and *distress*.

So in *this light*—in light of the plagues all being expressions of Yahweh's burning anger, wrath, and indignation—what does it *mean* when the Israelites, who are living in the midst of Egypt, are *miraculously* spared from the plagues that otherwise fall on *all* the land of Egypt? This theme of Israel's exemption from experiencing the effects of Yahweh's plagues comes to its climax in the tenth and final plague. In chapter eleven, Moses says to Pharaoh:

- ✓ Exodus 11:4-5, 7 — “Thus says the LORD: ‘About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle... *But not a dog shall growl against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.*’

In other words, though to all outward appearances Egypt and Israel are just two different ethnic groups, one being greater and far more powerful than the other, there is *more* here than just outward appearances – There is more here than just meets the eye. While Yahweh is sovereign *over* the Egyptians and over all their so-called gods, nevertheless, they are not His chosen people. That privilege has been given by the one true and living God to Israel. *They are His people*. And so by protecting and sparing the Israelites from His own plagues of wrath and indignation, the Lord *brings fully to light* and *makes VISIBLE* this *distinction* that *HE HAS*

MADE. This distinction isn't rooted in any inherent difference between the Egyptians and the Israelites because they were both stubborn, unbelieving, idol-worshiping peoples.² Therefore, it can only be rooted in God's sovereign, merciful, gracious choice. The Lord *makes* the distinction (He creates the distinction), and now He *reveals* the distinction and causes it to be *visible* by *miraculously* protecting and sparing the Israelites from His own plagues of wrath and indignation. God has determined that Pharaoh will know that He is Yahweh even in the midst of the land of Egypt. (8:22) And God reveals this not least of all *in His election of Israel as a special, "set apart" people – even in the very midst of the land of Egypt!* (cf. Enns) But having been confronted with this truth, Pharaoh pretends that he doesn't understand.

VII. Exodus 8:25 — Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God *within the land.*"

Pharaoh is trying to pretend that he's missed the entire point. When God *sets apart* the land of Goshen, and makes a *distinction* between *His people* and *Pharaoh's people* so that His wrath falls on the Egyptians, but the Israelites are miraculously spared, what does this mean? It can only mean that as God's chosen people, the Israelites' place is *not in Egypt*. It very obviously means that they must no longer stay in Egypt. And yet Pharaoh pretends to miss the entire point of the *distinction* that God has now *visibly revealed* by suggesting that Israel go and sacrifice to their God "*within* the land [of Egypt]."

Indeed, it seems that Pharaoh's motives are even more evil and sinister than they at first appear. See how Moses responds:

VIII. Exodus 8:26–27 — But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so, for the offerings we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God are an abomination to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us? We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he tells us."

I think Moses is just calling Pharaoh's bluff. (cf. Enns) Surely Pharaoh didn't need to be informed about how his own people would have responded to the corporate Israelite worship of the Israelite God within the land of Egypt! So Moses turns Pharaoh's attempted trickery back on his own head. This is *all the more* reason why Yahweh's chosen people must leave the land of Egypt. Once again, the *setting apart* of Israel within the land of Egypt points to the necessity that they ultimately be completely *set apart* in a land all their own.

IX. Exodus 8:28 — So Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; only you must not go very far away. Plead for me."

Pharaoh is arrogant. The "I" is emphatic in the Hebrew – "I, *I* will let you go...." Pharaoh is also still trying to stay in control of the situation – "*only* you must not go *very far away*. Obviously, Pharaoh is still trying to ignore the all-important *distinction* that Yahweh makes between the Israelites and the Egyptians!

Since Moses is no more naïve than we are, he responds accordingly:

² Deuteronomy 9:6-7, 24; Josh. 24:14; 1 Sam. 8:7-8

X. Exodus 8:29–32 — Then Moses said, “Behold, I, *I* am going out from you and I will plead with the LORD that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people, tomorrow. *Only* let not Pharaoh cheat again by not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.” So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD. And the LORD did as Moses asked, and removed the swarms of insects from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; not one remained. But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.

Conclusion

Sometimes, the distinction that God has made between the world and the people of His own sovereign, gracious choice doesn’t appear very evident. In fact, sometimes it seems invisible. While we seek to live lives that are righteous and blameless *before the Lord*, in many other ways we may appear to be no more “different” or “set apart” than anyone else. We make our homes in the same cities, work the same jobs, enjoy many of the same things in this life, experience many of the same hardships, live in the same relationships, and are often times even persecuted and oppressed by the world. As the Psalmist realized, sometimes the life of the unbeliever can even appear to be far more attractive than the life of the righteous.

- ✓ Psalm 73:2–3 — But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

But this morning, we’re reminded of one of the most basic teachings of Scripture – that though to all outward appearances there may seem to be “no difference,” nevertheless, *the Lord makes a distinction* between the world and those whom He has graciously chosen to be His people. That distinction is just as real today as it will ever be, and yet one day God will bring it fully to light. By protecting and sparing His church from the wrath and indignation that He will bring one day on all the wicked, the Lord will bring fully to light and make visible the *distinction* that *He has made*, and that *He makes* even *today* – not because of our righteousness, but because of His mercy and grace.

Sometime maybe our feet will almost stumble and our steps almost slip. The psalmist who was at first envious of the arrogant went on to write these words:

- ✓ Psalm 73:15–17, 27–28 — If I had said, “I will speak thus,” I would have betrayed the generation of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end...

And so we are called to walk by *faith* and not by sight, knowing that one day the *distinction* that God has made will be brought to light—not only *on that day* when we’re mercifully spared from His righteous judgment, but also *on that day* when we’re graciously welcomed into His kingdom of everlasting peace and joy.

The distinction between Egypt and Israel that God brought to light in the ten plagues was finally “concluded” at the Red Sea. Listen as Moses and the people of Israel sing this song to Yahweh:

- ✓ Exodus 15:17–19 (cf. 14:28-29) — You will bring [your people] in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established. The LORD will reign forever and ever. For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea.

Brothers and sisters, “just like [Israel] in the Old Testament, we have been set apart, called [out of]... the world by the power of the sovereign God of the universe.” (Currid)

- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 5:6–11 — So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Scriptures for further study and reflection: Mat. 13:24-30, 36-43; 24:37-41; Rev. 7:1-3; Rev. 9:3-4; Ezek. 9:4-11; Rom. 8:1



Bible History Online



