

Exodus 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 8 The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants.
- And the Lord said to Moses, Say to Aaron, stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals and over the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.
- So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.
- Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, Plead with the Lord to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord. Moses said to Pharaoh, Be pleased to command me when I am to plead for you and for your servants and for your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile.
- And he said, Tomorrow. Moses said, Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God. The frogs shall go away from you and your houses and your servants and your people.
- [1 : 3 8] They shall be left only in the Nile. So Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh, and Moses cried to the Lord about the frogs, as he had agreed with Pharaoh. And the Lord did according to the word of Moses.
- The frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards and the fields, and they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.
- Then the Lord said to Moses, Say to Aaron, Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.
- And they did so. Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt.
- The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, This is the finger of God.
- [2 : 4 5] But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. 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 flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand.
- But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth.

Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen. And the Lord did so. There came great swarms of flies into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants' houses.

Throughout all the land of Egypt, the land was ruined by the swarms of flies. Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said, Go, sacrifice to your God within the land.

[3 : 59] 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. 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. Then Moses said, Behold, 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 flies 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. In Exodus chapter 8, we move on to plagues 2 to 4.

[5 : 11] We should remind ourselves at this point of the pattern of the plagues. There are three sets of three plagues with a great capstone plague, the slaying of the firstborn. The plagues gradually move from the Nile upwards.

They move from discomfort to more direct attacks upon property and flesh to judgment from the heavens. The first cycle has Aaron squaring off against the magicians of Pharaoh.

The second cycle is very much Moses versus Pharaoh. And the third cycle is God against the false gods. And there's an internal pattern to each cycle.

In plagues 1, 4, and 7, the first in each sequence, they occur in the morning, and Moses meets with Pharaoh as he comes out of the river. In plagues 2, 5, and 8, the second in the sequence, he comes to Pharaoh to warn him, presumably during the day.

And then in the final plague of each sequence, there's no warning or opportunity to change course. It's, as it were, the evening plague. The first plague was the turning of the river and the various waters into blood.

[6 : 14] And the second plague, the plague of frogs, originates in the river and comes out to the land. There's a natural progression here. The water has been polluted and now things from the water come onto the land and pollute the land.

We are told that the Nile swarms or teems with frogs. And this language is only used on one other occasion in the book of Exodus. In chapter 1, verse 7, the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly.

They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them. Israel teems and fills the entire land of Egypt. Now the frogs will come up from the Nile and do the same.

If the turning of the water into blood recalled the infanticide that the Nile had covered up, in the plague of frogs, it's as if the teeming people who were drowned are coming up and covering the land once more.

God speaks to Moses at this point who has to tell Aaron to stretch out his rod. Once again, Aaron seems to be the main actor while the magicians are still in play as he's their counterpart.

[7 : 21] They're the pawns on the board and they need to be removed by the time that God deals with the people on the back row, the gods of Egypt and Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh has to request the removal of the frogs.

You can note the parallels between Israel and the frogs again. If Israel teems like the frogs and fills the land like the frogs, the Lord is telling Pharaoh to let his people go, but he's also symbolically representing his people's presence in the land in the form of plagues from which Pharaoh must ask for relief.

And there's an ironic character to all of this. God is presenting his people as if a plague upon the land. You can also think about the way that the frogs would be associated with the Egyptian deity of fertility, Hecate.

This goddess was also associated with midwifery. This raises the possibility that the frogs don't just represent the Hebrew infants who were drowned within the river that has turned to blood, but that there is also some retribution for the role that Pharaoh tried to get the midwives to play in the crime.

One of the immediate outcomes of the plague of the frogs is a defiling of the land. The frogs, as their dead bodies are piled up, cause a stink in the land.

[8 : 39] Notice that this term has already been used in reference to Israel itself back in chapter 5, verse 21. The Lord look on you and judge because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants.

And then the Nile is caused to stink in chapter 7, verses 18 and 21. There are piles of stinking dead bodies beside the waters.

This might make us think further on down the line in chapter 14, verse 30, the dead bodies of the Egyptians themselves are piled up. Maybe that comes into view as well.

Moses' request for the timing of the plague's removal is interesting, particularly in Pharaoh's response. Pharaoh asks, not as you would expect, remove them right away.

Get rid of the frogs as soon as you possibly can. No, he says, tomorrow. Why tomorrow? Well, in part, because any god can perform some great act of power, throwing the muscle of deity around and making some big effect within the world.

[9 : 43] Any deity can do that. But something more is at play when we see a god acting with such precision. Not just throwing great power around, but acting with great precision.

And so asking for the frogs to be removed the next day tests the precision of God. Is God just a deity throwing his weight around? Or is God a deity who is able to control things truly?

Pharaoh initially relents and agrees to let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord. But then he hardens his heart when there is some relief. Following this, there is a third plague.

And this third plague is a sort of spreading of the rot. In the first two plagues, Aaron stretched out his rod over the rivers and canals and pools of Egypt. But in the third, he strikes the dust.

The waters were turned to blood. Now the dust comes alive. It turns into gnats or mosquitoes or lice. We're not entirely sure what these things are.

[10 : 44] We might also see a natural progression here. The dead bodies of the frogs have been piled up. And within those dead bodies, the larvae of mosquitoes and other creatures have been developing.

And now those come and cause a problem. The dust is associated with the curse. And the third plague leads to the curse coming up from the ground. The top soil becomes alive.

And then there's this covering of people. The third plague, which is the final in the first cycle of plagues, leads to the climactic event of the defeat of the magicians.

They realise that they are dealing with the finger of God. This is not just human trickery or some sleight of hand. There is something here that cannot be replicated by human arts and skills.

This is the finger of God himself. And yet, Pharaoh strengthens his heart. Now it's important to notice the difference between the ways in which Pharaoh's heart is said to respond.

[11 : 42] At certain points, it is said that he hardens his heart or that God hardens his heart. At other points, he strengthens his heart or God strengthens his heart. These seem to be different things, although there is a relationship between them, of course.

When he strengthens his heart, there's a sort of emboldening of his heart. He takes new added courage and spirit and he's able to stand up and be even more resistant.

The hardening is a lack of responsiveness. This closing down, this making the heart dull and heavy. And these are slightly different things. As God strengthens the heart of Pharaoh, we can see that God is giving him the spirit to resist.

He's giving him the strength by which he can rise up and resist God. Not just dulling his heart, but giving him a greater power in which to pit himself against God.

The fourth plague, which comes next, follows the same pattern of three. So it begins with the morning, as Pharaoh is coming out of the water, will be followed by a plague in which Moses presents himself to Pharaoh during the day and then finally a plague that comes without warning later on.

[12 : 54] Aaron is no longer so prominent within these plagues. In the previous three, he was squaring off against the Egyptian magicians, but now they've been taken out of the fight for the most part. So now it's Moses primarily in conversation with Pharaoh.

There's also an added dimension at this point in that God makes a distinction between the Egyptians and his people. Formerly, it seems that all came under judgment, but God, in preparation for taking his people out, is gradually separating and distinguishing the people of Israel from the Egyptians.

In the swarms of flies or beetles or whatever the creatures are here, it's as if the previous plague may be coming more airborne. That's one possibility. We're not entirely sure what either of these creatures are exactly, so it's not entirely certain how they relate to each other.

In Psalm 78, verse 45, they seem to be biting insects, insects or creatures that feed upon the Egyptians. They also seem to be clinging to the Egyptians and their dwellings to a greater degree.

It's not just upon the land and creatures in general. It's like a natural guided missile, that these things are following the Egyptians around, they're going into their houses, they're causing problems that are very clearly targeted upon the Egyptians.

[14 : 10] There's a greater precision here, a more targeted character to this particular judgment. This is followed by further negotiations between Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron. They insist that they must sacrifice at three days' journey according to God's command.

And when there is some agreement reached, we're told that not one of the swarms remained. This is an expression that's also found in chapter 10, verse 19, in reference to the locusts.

But also, interestingly, in chapter 14, verse 28, in reference to the Egyptians themselves, that as a result of the judgment of the Red Sea, not one of them remains.

Seeing the sort of associations that we've noted between the Israelites and the creatures of the plagues, but also with the Egyptians and the creatures of the plagues, we can see maybe that there's something deeper going on here.

These are signs, they're symbols of what God is doing, they're symbols of judgment, but also a possibility, how if you respond, you can avoid these fates that await you, that these fates that are initially just external discomforts and become more and more intimate and more and more directed, that if you respond in time, you will be able to avert the fate that awaits you.

[15 : 29] However, once again, Pharaoh proves untrustworthy and won't let them go. A question to consider. The story of the plagues is in many ways a story that teaches us a lot about sin and the way that God brings sin to our attention.

We see the way in which people are reminded of the crime by the water being turned to blood, the way that the crime becomes a discomfort in the plague of the frogs, and then how the sin becomes more and more in their face and unavoidable.

In the process, God is bringing this sin to a reckoning, and he's also preparing the people to recognise the true character of the sin. The judgements bring to light the character of what has been done.

What are some of the ways that you see that these passages shed light upon our understanding of sin, and the way that God brings it to the surface in our own lives and societies, and how we should respond as he does so?