

# Exodus 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Exodus chapter 9 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.

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. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw them in the air in the sight of Pharaoh.

It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt. So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh.

[ 1 : 26 ] And Moses threw it in the air, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils came upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians.

But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had spoken to Moses. Then the Lord said to Moses, Rise up early in the morning, and present yourself before Pharaoh, and say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me.

For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants, and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put out my hand, and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth.

But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. You are still exalting yourself against my people, and will not let them go.

Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Now therefore, send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field, into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field, and is not brought home, will die when the hail falls on them.

[ 2 : 53 ] Then whoever feared the word of the Lord among the servants of Pharaoh, hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses. But whoever did not pay attention to the word of the Lord, left his slaves and his livestock in the field.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand toward heaven, so that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, on man and beast, and every plant of the field in the land of Egypt.

Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire ran down to the earth. And the Lord rained hail upon the land of Egypt.

There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt, since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the field, in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and the hail struck down every plant of the field, and broke every tree of the field.

Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were, was there no hail. Then Pharaoh sent and called Moses and Aaron, and said to them, This time I have sinned.

[ 4 : 04 ] The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with the Lord, for there has been enough of God's thunder and hail. I will let you go, and you shall stay no longer.

Moses said to him, As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the Lord. The thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's.

But as for you and your servants, I know that you do not yet fear the Lord God. The flax and the barley were struck down, for the barley was in the ear, and the flax was in bud.

But the wheat and the emmer were not struck down, for they are late in coming up. So Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh, and stretched out his hands to the Lord, and the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured upon the earth.

But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

[ 5 : 13 ] In Exodus chapter 9, we arrive at the last two plagues of the second cycle of three plagues, and the first plague of the third cycle of plagues. As we've discussed already, the plagues happen in groups of three.

So the first one begins in the morning, the next one is in the day, and then the final one comes without warning. God instructs Moses to go into Pharaoh, and to inform him of a coming plague.

Moses by himself, without Aaron. There's no mention of the rod, or of Aaron's action in the second cycle of plagues. This is a plague upon the livestock, and once again there's a distinction made between the Israelites and the Egyptians.

And God declares a time at which this event will occur. It says that all of the livestock of the Egyptians die, but a few verses later in the plague of the hail, we see livestock again.

So it seems to me that the statements are either hyperbolic, not intended to be taken in the strictly literal sense, like we might say everyone came out to support the team, recognising that presumably some people still stayed at home, but the group of people generally attended.

[ 6 : 20 ] Or we could think about it only referring specifically to the livestock that are out in the field. So all of the livestock of the Egyptians, the livestock out in the field, are destroyed.

The livestock are suffering on account of the sin of the Egyptians, and the resistance of Pharaoh. The natural order and the creatures are set into disarray, and they suffer as a result of the sin of human beings.

This is something we see at the curse. This is something that we see also in the flood. Humanity is responsible for the well-being of the animals. And as humanity sins, the whole of the creation suffers.

It's not just human beings that suffer for their own sins. Our sins have consequences for the entire creation. As the plague upon the livestock occurs, Pharaoh checks to see whether any of the livestock of Israel were dead.

He wants to ensure that God is actually doing this, that God is able to distinguish between his people and the Egyptians. Is this just an act of power, or is it an act of precision as well?

[ 7 : 25 ] But even when he sees the evidence that God is a God of power and precision, he hardens his heart again. The sixth plague, the final plague in the second cycle of plagues, comes without a prior warning.

It's simply an act of judgment performed before Pharaoh, and Moses performs the action in particular. Soot is taken from the kilns, that soot thrown up into the air becomes dust, and then that dust breaks out in sores on man and beast throughout the land.

Once again, there is likely symbolism here, a testimony to Egypt's oppression of Israel in forcing them to make bricks. Some have questioned this, saying that it isn't clear that the Egyptians used kilns for brick making, rather than simply using sun-dried bricks.

But other commentators dispute that claim, saying that during the period we do have evidence of fire-baked bricks, not just sun-dried bricks. It's a symbolic action, connecting soot with the affliction that follows, and also making clear that God is the one who brings about this problem.

Boils elsewhere are associated with leprosy, in places like Leviticus 13, and in Deuteronomy chapter 28, the boils are explicitly associated with Egypt.

[ 8 : 40 ] In verse 27 we read, And then in verse 35, So the boils were associated with Egypt at that point, and their very bodies are afflicted at this stage.

This is not just the external inconvenience of the water being turned into blood. It's not just the discomfort and the unpleasantness of the frogs, and the lice, and the flies, and these sorts of things.

It is something that's striking in a more intimate place. We might be reminded of the case of Job. Striking the body is a more severe and intimate attack. And there's a sort of living state of death.

There's a putrefaction of the flesh. And the association between leprosy and the plagues of Egypt might also come to mind here. The language that's used in association with the plagues also occurs in the context of the laws concerning leprosy, in Leviticus chapter 13 and 14.

Leprosy itself is called a plague in those places. And also we might think back to the sign that's given to Moses, the second sign, as he puts his hand into his garment and then takes it out and it becomes leprous, and then puts it back in again and it's healed.

[ 10 : 08 ] There is a leprosy that's clinging to the nation of Egypt. A leprosy that the sixth plague reveals, brings to light. At the end of the third plague, the Egyptian magicians recognised that they were dealing with the finger of God.

They could not replicate the signs performed by Aaron. And here they're knocked out more decisively. They're defiled by the skin disease. They can't stand before Pharaoh anymore.

They're overcome completely. But yet God strengthens Pharaoh's heart at this point. Now what does this mean that God strengthens Pharaoh's heart? The language is different from God hardening Pharaoh's heart or Pharaoh hardening his own heart.

The language of hardening suggests the stubbornness and the obstinacy of Pharaoh. He will not respond to God. No matter what God throws at him, he resists. But strengthening suggests something different.

Strengthening suggests the emboldening of Pharaoh's heart. What God seems to be doing here is giving Pharaoh the power to resist. God is not just going to steamroll a Pharaoh.

[ 11 : 13 ] He could do that. He could just crush Pharaoh with his might. But by strengthening the heart of Pharaoh, God is determined to win by principle, not just by power.

God could win by power. He could use his power to strike terror, fear and awe into the heart of Pharaoh. So Pharaoh would just give up and surrender and put up his hands.

He's faced with a greater power. He can't do anything. But by emboldening the heart of Pharaoh, God ensures that Pharaoh won't just give up. Pharaoh will have to admit his place relative to God.

He won't just submit out of fear and defeat, but he will submit as he recognises who God is. The seventh plague is the start of the third cycle of plagues.

And once again, it happens first thing in the morning. This time, God is going to send the plague more directly himself. God declares that he has raised Pharaoh up for a purpose, so that his own power and name might be proclaimed in all of the earth.

[ 12 : 15 ] God could have taken the Israelites out of Egypt without any trouble. He could have whisked them away. He could have used darkness, for instance, and just allowed the people to escape under cover of night.

He could have completely devastated the Egyptians instantaneously. But he didn't do any of those things. It is essential that we see that the Exodus, more than the matter of delivering Israel from Egypt, more than the matter of judging the Egyptians for their sins, is about God demonstrating who he is.

And the fact that there are a series of plagues, plagues that strike at different parts of the life and the world of Egypt, shows God's power in each one of the realms that would be attributed to different gods of the Egyptians.

This time something else happens that hasn't happened before. There's a warning given and a chance to repent. Whoever fears the word of the Lord has the chance to deliver themselves.

Note the fear of the word of the Lord, not just his destructive might. Any person can fear the plague when it hits, but those who fear the word of the Lord will remove their animals and their slaves before it hits.

[ 13 : 26 ] The second cycle of plagues begins a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites, the land of Goshen and the rest of Egypt. And the third cycle begins a distinction between God-fearing Egyptians and others within the land of Egypt, and those who resist the Lord, Pharaoh and his servants who align with him.

Moses stretches out his hand, holding his staff towards heaven. And the plague involves thunder, fire and hail all together. This is a massive and terrible electrical storm.

And the combination is probably a significant sign of God's power to wield these elements in concert with each other. God is not, like most of the gods of the Egyptians, a god of just one particular element, one particular part of the cosmos.

This is a God who is in control of all these different parts of the world, and he can use them one after another in succession, but also at the same time.

This is a sign of God's power over the creation that he has created. And after this plague, Pharaoh seems to confess his fault, but his admission again is shallow, and he hardens his heart once more.

[ 14 : 35 ] As Moses recognises when he speaks to him, Pharaoh and his servants still do not fear the Lord. This judgment occurred at the time of the flax and the barley, so it was likely in the first week of February.

Some scholars have observed that the order of the plagues does not seem to be arbitrary. Rather, we can think of a causal chain that connects them. Now, this is not to deny that God is in control of the entire causal chain.

Indeed, that's the precise point. Nor is it intended to reduce all of these things to natural causation. There are some plagues, such as the plague on the firstborn, which cannot be explained in this way.

The point, rather, is to show the manner of God's work within his creation. Even miracles can use the natural means and causes of the creation itself.

So the suggestion that some have given is that it starts off with heavy rain at the source of the Nile, and that pollutes the river with red earth, which gives it its red colour, it turns to blood.

[ 15 : 37 ] But in association with the picking up of this red earth, there's this explosion of flagellates, and those flagellates cause the water to become smelly, they deoxygenate the water, causing fish to die, and the place just becomes disgusting.

And then, as a result of this water going all over the land, as there's been an especially pronounced flooding season, sources of water that people would formerly have depended upon have all become polluted, and they have to dig new wells.

As a result of this, the habitat of the frogs is fouled up by the dead fish, and the frogs leave it and go into human residences and elsewhere.

But they become infected by anthrax, and after they take refuge in man-made places, they end up suddenly dying. At this point, the Nile subsides, and that leaves all these stagnant pools.

And within those pools, there's a proliferation of mosquitoes. Now this is taking us from August to about September or October. At that point, there is this breeding of horseflies, and they are breeding rapidly in the decaying vegetation that has been left behind by the flooding of the River Nile.

[ 16 : 52 ] They don't breed in the land of Goshen, because the conditions aren't right for them. They die, possibly because they've been infected by the anthrax. And then the cattle go out to pasture as the flood recedes, as the Egyptians would usually put their cattle out at that point.

But they're eating from ground that has been infested by anthrax, by the dead frogs, and they end up dying as a result. At this point, flies that have picked up anthrax spores from the cattle and elsewhere, they bite animals and human beings, and they infect the human beings, producing this skin condition.

By this point, we arrive at the events of the hailstorm, and that comes in early February or late January. This has been a series of blows upon Egypt, starting at about the time of August, and it will go all the way through to April.

It moves from severe irritation to disaster, to utterly devastating calamity. It is as if God has set up this vast Rube Goldberg machine of judgment.

The sin of Pharaoh and the Egyptians has set it in motion, and until they repent, things are not going to be stopped. A question to consider.

[ 18 : 07 ] The plagues are a revelation of God's power, of the character of God's power. By this point in the story, what have we learnt about the character of God's power, and the way that it contrasts with the power of the false gods?

