



The Plagues of Egypt

Background Notes



Note: This information won't help you in your walk with God but it might help you to realize that these events were about real people in a real time and place and they did have a purpose.

Egypt

Egypt was the most powerful country in the world at the time of the Exodus with a small empire that included Palestine, Syria and Upper Nubia to the south. Pharaoh Tuthmosis III sent regular campaigns into the area. Following the Battle of Megiddo in May 1482 BC, Egyptian control over Canaan was at its highest.

It was also the wealthiest country. It mined gold and other precious metals. It had the best education system available of the time, teaching subjects such as Maths, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, law, philosophy, theology, horse-riding, archery and hunting. Egypt had plenty to feel confident about.

The Plagues

Plagues such as those described in Exodus happened from time to time but these particular ones had several unusual/miraculous aspects to them.

- They were intense
- They were predicted – both their arrival & departure
- They discriminated – the Hebrews were not affected by most of them
- They gradually got worse
- They had a purpose

It is thought that the plagues began about June/July with the rise of the Nile, which, if it was unusually high, would account for some of the problems. Some believe that the eruption of a volcano, possibly on Santorini, contributed to some of the plagues. Even so, the timing is God's.

Purpose: So why all these plagues?

- Egypt was the great superpower of the day. Pharaoh thought that he was the most powerful man on the planet. He wasn't going to agree easily that his slave force could go free. It showed his limits and both a ruler and a 'god'. He was powerless to prevent the plagues.
- Each plague was an attack on one or more major Egyptian god.
- It undermined the credibility of Egypt's wise men, sorcerers, magicians, & priests
- It showed Israel that they had a really powerful God with them. He was someone they could trust.
- God wanted not only Israel but also the whole of the civilised world to see a small demonstration of his power so that many would believe in him. The stories circulated for years and the reputation of Israel's God went ahead of them – which is why 40 years later Rahab of Jericho decided to throw her lot in with them. Many people had the opportunity to come to faith because of what happened in Egypt at that time. Many of the Egyptians themselves believed in him and some of them even left Egypt at that time with the children of Israel. There are many Christians in Egypt today.

1. *Water changed to blood*

The Nile was Egypt's lifeline. It would not have existed without it. Each year it brought down rainwater and silt from the mountains and flooded the land, turning Egypt into a fertile oasis where crops could flourish. It is appropriate that the plagues began by attacking the Nile. Some see it as retribution for the blood of the Israelite children who were thrown into the Nile by Pharaoh. The higher the Nile in flood, the more red soil it brought downstream. It could also bring microcosms known as *flagellates* and other bacteria which would have killed the fish.

Associated gods

- Pharaoh himself – it was his 'job' to ensure that the Nile flooded to the right level, not too much and not too little! Much of his time was taken up with elaborate ceremonies to ensure the well-being of Egypt.
- Hapi – the god of the Nile in flood. He was believed to live in a cave from which the Nile flowed out. The annual flooding was called 'the arrival of Hapi'.
- Khnum – guardian of Nile sources

2. *Frogs*

Frogs were considered sacred & their presence would normally be welcomed. They appeared as the Nile was receding and marked the fact that the fertility of the land had again been renewed. They are usually rapidly eaten by the ibis. Killing them was forbidden.

Associated gods

Khnum's wife Heqt took the form of a frog. She was the goddess of fertility and resurrection and was said to assist women in childbirth.

3. *Lice or Gnats*

These were a kind of gnat or mosquito, so small they were hardly visible – hence the association with dust. Physical purity was very important to the priests and the presence of these gnats must have made it very difficult for them to carry out their religious duties. The gnats also give a painful sting.

Associated gods

Geb – the god of the earth, or vegetation. The gnats appeared to come out of the dust.

4. *Flies*

The Hebrew just says 'swarms' so we don't know which insect it was. Some insects were associated with gods. They may well have brought disease.

Associated gods

Khephi – the god of insects

5. *Livestock*

This was the first plague to damage property. It had serious economic consequences because animals were so widely used – in agriculture, for transport, for milk & cheese. The Egyptians worshiped many animals, but especially the ram, the ox and the bull.

Associated gods

Osiris – his soul was said to reside in the body of a bull

Hathor, the goddess of love, beauty & joy was represented by a cow.

A bull was associated with the god Ra and the Apis bull was the sacred animal of Ptah

6. Boils

If the ashes/soot that Moses threw were taken from a brick kiln, then this plague would have been symbolic of the oppression of the Israelites.

Associated gods

Sekhmet, a lion-headed goddess was supposed to have the power to create epidemics and bring them to an end.

Serapis was the god of healing

Imhotep was the god of medicine & healing sciences.

7. Hail, thunder & lightning

This destroyed animals and slaves as well as the flax and barley that were about to be harvested.

These were either animals unaffected by the earlier plague or had been imported, probably from Libya and Syria to replace the others. The storm was so incredible that even Pharaoh admitted that he had sinned.

Associated gods

Nutt was the sky goddess.

Isis and Seth were responsible for agricultural crops.

8. Locusts

The Egyptians feared locusts and for good reason. There can be anywhere between 100 million and 200 million locusts per square mile. A swarm may cover anything from just a few square miles up to 400 square miles. They can destroy crops in just a few minutes. The threat of this disaster was enough to make Pharaoh consider making a small concession – to let just the men go into the wilderness to sacrifice to God.

Associated gods

Anubis – the god of the fields

Isis – protector against locusts

9. Darkness

This may have been caused by a sandstorm known as the Khamsin, sometimes brought by a south-west wind in early spring. The air, charged with electricity draws up the fine dust and sand until the sun's light is hidden. The air is so thick that even artificial light is no good. It gets through doors and windows and people seek maximum shelter in places like cellars.

Associated gods

Amun / Ra / Re – the sun god

Horus – symbolized by a winged sun disc

Hathor – goddess of love was a sky goddess

Nut – goddess of the sky

10. Death of the First-born

Pharaoh himself was considered a god, as was his first-born son. In fact, first-born people and animals were often worshipped. When God gave the law to the Israelites he forbade them to sacrifice any of their children and they had to 'buy back' their firstborn. God himself sacrificed his only Son.

More detail on Egyptian gods will be included in the next update for those who home educate. Image: clip art