

Exodus 7:8-11:10: The Plagues In Egypt

Remembering where we were

How does the Bible start?

Let us look.

It starts with God's creating of the world.

However, when we get to verse 2 we are told that for some reason the earth is in a formless state.

It is chaotic.

It is full of emptiness and darkness.

It is into this world that God speaks.

He creates order.

And in that order he creates humans.

These humans have their place in God's world.

In God's world they are to be fruitful and multiply.

They are to rule over God's world under God's rule.

They are to live under God's word in God's world.

This is their role in God's world.

However, Genesis 2-3 tells us that humans reject God's ordering of their world.

They step out from under his rule and throw their existence and the world existence into disharmony and disturbance.

They reach out at being God and God punishes them by throwing them out of his garden.

Then, in Genesis 12, we are told that God choose one man and his children out of all the world.

He gives this man great promises.

He tells this man that he will make him fruitful.

He will make him a great nation.

He will give him a land.

He will bless this man and his descendants.

And through this man and his descendants he will bring about his purpose of blessing for the whole world.

He will bless this man and cause him to be a blessing.

Now look at Exodus 1:6-7.

These verses tell us that the descendants of Abraham are doing what God intended for them.

They are fulfilling God's creation purpose.

They are being fruitful and multiplying.
They are filling the earth as God planned.
But then Pharaoh steps in.
And he decides that he will oppose God and his purposes.
He will seek to stop the children of Abraham being fruitful and multiplying.
And he will seek to stop them returning to the land that God promise them.
He will stop God's purpose of blessing for them.
It is this background that explains Exodus 7:4.
You see, Exodus 7:4 tells us that God is about to do some 'mighty acts of judgment'.
The phrase itself suggests that Pharaoh has done something wrong.
But what is it that he has done?
Is it simply that he has persecuted the people of God?
Is it simply that he has been a harsh master?
No, it is that God has a purpose for creation.
That purpose involves humans filling the earth and subduing it.
That purpose involves Abraham's progeny growing in number so that they are like the sand of the seashore in number.
That purpose involves Abraham's progeny being a blessing to the world.
And this cannot happen if they are in Egypt under a harsh oppressor.
Pharaoh is opposing God's purpose in creation.
Pharaoh is opposing God's purpose in redemption.
By abusing God's people, Pharaoh has sought to secede from God's sovereign rule.
He has formed a 'break-away state'.
He must be brought into line.
And if he resists, he must pay the price.

Let the contest begin (7:8-13)

And so, with Exodus 7:8-13 the contest begins.
God anticipates what Pharaoh will do.
He will request a miracle.
And Moses and Aaron are to oblige.
They are to take Aaron's staff, that is, they are to take their symbol of authority.
And they are to throw it onto the ground and turn it into a snake.
Now we need to understand what is going on here.
You see, the word used here for 'snake' is not the ordinary word.
It is not the word used in Exodus 4:3 in referring to a snake.
No.
The word used here is a word for crocodiles, and great sea serpents.
It is the word used in Genesis 1:21 for the great sea monsters.
It is the word used in Ezekiel 29:3 for Pharaoh, King of Egypt (cf. Psalm 74:14).
Listen to Ezekiel 29:3.

*I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,
You great sea monster lying among your streams.*

You say, 'The Nile is mine; I made it for myself.

When Aaron throws down the staff it becomes a writhing serpent, a terrifying creature.

But Pharaoh is not terrified easily.

He counters with his magicians.

And they too produce a great sea monster.

However, the staff of Aaron swallows up the staff of the magicians.

This is a dramatic point.

You see, in much of the ancient world, the sea serpent was regarded as a mythical force of immense power and chaos. [cf. Motyer on Isaiah 27:1]

This is Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

But the Lord will swallow him up.

The Lord will tame him as he tamed the great sea monsters in Genesis 1.

God will defeat chaos and reestablish his creative order as he did then.

The Plagues (7:14-11:10)

Plague 1: Water into blood (7:14-25)

The first sign has been performed.

Now the plagues begin.

Let's have a look at the first plague.

But before we do, I want you to come with me to Ezekiel 29:3 again.

Here we are told that one particular Pharaoh later in history saw him self to be the source of the Nile.

He saw himself to be the creator of the Nile.

Well, we already know the arrogance of this Pharaoh in the book of Exodus.

He has already set out to challenge God and God's creative work in the world.

It is clear that he thinks he can do what he likes, when he likes, with whom he likes.

It is clear that he sees himself as having no one to whom he is responsible.

He has raised himself up.

He has, in fact, given himself the status of God.

It would not be out of place for him to claim that he was the creator of the Nile.

And perhaps this is why the first plague starts with the river Nile.

Let's have a look at what happens.

The story is straightforward.

Moses goes to Pharaoh.

He warns him of what will happen.

And then he carried out the threat – the water of the Nile is turned into blood.

Blood is everywhere.

Fish die.

The river smells.

But the Egyptian magicians manage to find some unpolluted water.

And they do the same thing.

And Pharaoh takes no notice.
And in some senses, it's not hard to imagine.
After all, there is a well known phenomena that occurs periodically in the Nile valley.
Melting snow and summer rain in the highlands of Ethiopia carry sediment from the tropical red earth of that region.
It discolours the water.
It is also possible that if the amount of sediment was extremely high that other factors might cut in and disturb the oxygen balance of the water and kill off the fish.
The dead fish would inevitably produce a foul stink.
Ancient Egyptian texts tell us occasions when the river was blood and the people thirsted for water.
Nevertheless, even though Pharaoh wants to ignore things, God is making a clear statement.
The river Nile...
The land of Egypt...
The people of Egypt...
And the people of Israel...
And not the creation of Pharaoh.
They are not his, to do with as he wishes.
These things are in the hands of a real God to do with as he wishes.
And if Pharaoh continues on this course.
If he pushes on.
If he insists on ignoring God and his will.
Then there will be blood throughout this land.
And the grief and pain will not be able to be ignored.
Listen to Ezekiel 29:3-5 again.

*I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,
You great sea monster lying among your streams.
You say, 'The Nile is mine; I made it for myself.
But I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales.
I will pull you out from among your streams with all the fish sticking to your scales.
I will leave you in the desert, you and all the fish of your streams.
You will fall on the open field and not be gathered up or picked up.
I will give you as food to all the beasts of the earth and birds of the air.
Then all who live in Egypt will know that I am the Lord.*

Plague 2: Frogs (7:26-8:11)

As redness in the Nile was not unknown, neither were frogs.
Frogs often massed on land in September/October in Egypt after Nile receded.
But not like this.

Frogs with their filth, their sliminess, their repulsiveness, the disease, and their smell fill the land.
Frogs in houses.
Frogs in beds.
Frogs in cooking utensils.
Frogs in palaces.
Frogs everywhere.
But then the magicians manage to repeat the trick.
And the frogs are doubled.
Twice as many frogs in your house, your bed, your cooking utensils, your palace.
It is overwhelming.
And for the first time, Pharaoh asks for mercy.
And God removes the frogs.
They die in their masses.
And their carcasses were gathered together.
And the whole land stank with the smell of rotting frogs.
And the smell of death throughout the land foreshadows the death of the firstborn that will come with the tenth plague.

Plague 3: Vermin/Gnats/Mosquitoes (8:12-15)

Some years ago my family and I went camping in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory.
When we arrived, we decided to set up camp beside the particularly beautiful billabong.
We set up our tents and began to prepare for the evening meal as the sun began to go down.
And then it happened.
The first mosquito bite.
Then the next.
Then the next.
It was as though the mosquitoes had been hiding behind the trees waiting for the sun to go down.
I have never seen so many mosquitoes of so many varieties.
They were everywhere.
They were every colour.
They were every size.
There were green ones, yellow ones, red ones, black ones.
They covered everything.
And the only place you could hide from them was in the tent with the zip firmly closed.
Plague 3 is a plague of some sort of vermin.
We don't quite know from the word used here as to what is being referred to.
One possibility is that mosquitoes are being referred to.

These carriers of disease were normally bad enough in October/November.
But what we do know is that what my family experienced in Kakadu would have been a blessing beside this plague.

Their were stinging, biting, harrassing bugs everywhere.

And for the first time, the magicians have met their match.

God has bested them.

And they publicly acknowledge that what is happening is the work of God.

But Pharaoh hangs on.

He will not hear the words of his advisers.

He pursues his stubborn course.

And the bugs appear to remain.

There is no indication that they are taken away.

Plague 4: Swarms of Insects/Flies (8:16-28)

The nature of plague 4 is again uncertain.

It seems as though it refers to some sort of swarming, flying insects.

It is possible that it refers to the stable fly, a vicious, bloodsucking insect that can multiply in huge numbers in tropical and subtropical regions.

It is known to transmit anthrax and other animal diseases.

But this plague is noticeable for some other factors.

The first point to notice: For the first time, God is the agent of the action rather than Moses or Aaron.

Second, the people of Israel, their animals, and their land, are exempted.

Third, the passage talks about the wholesale destruction of the land.

God intends to destroy the land as he will later ruin Egypt.

These factors combine to state clearly that the conflict has been intensified.

Pharaoh's resistance to God's purposes will bring increasing and severe judgment.

Nevertheless, in this plague Pharaoh does begin to make concessions.

But then he withdraws.

And in the meantime, God restores his creation to its intended state.

He withdraws the flies.

And the stage is set for the fifth plague.

Plague 5: Pestilence on livestock (9:1-7)

The idea of separation between Israel and Egypt is heightened in the fifth plague.

Some deadly disease, is sent by God to afflict the livestock of Egypt.

The livestock of Israel are okay.

Pharaoh sends to check it out.

And he finds it to be true.

And yet he again refuses to let the Israelites go.

Plague 6: Boils (9:8-12)

As with plague 3, this plague comes with no announcement, no warning, and no chance for debate.
And with this plague comes the first real indication that the very lives of the Egyptians are in danger.
Now the issue is not just pesky frogs and insects or pestilence on livestock.
Now humans are afflicted.
In a deep irony, the kilns which were used to make bricks are the source of this plague.
The nature of the plague is festering boils.
Again, it is possible that anthrax is being talked about.
No matter what, the problem is certainly uncomfortable and probably very painful.
Again, this plague shows a definite heightening of intensity.
The magicians appear but are totally powerless.
They cannot even save themselves with their magic, let alone all Egypt.
And for the first time in the plague stories, Pharaoh's disobedience is attributed to God.

Plague 7: Hail (9:13-35)

Plagues 7 and 8 constitute the longest narratives in the series.
A lot of the length is taken up in telling us about the details regarding the natural phenomena and their effects upon all elements of Egyptian life.
For the first time we are told about the effects upon vegetation of all kinds.
Every element of the natural order seems to be caught up in this cosmic conflict in one way or another.
In this plague the heavens themselves are to be unleashed against Egypt.
The elements will obey their creator, even to the point of God specifying their target with precision and accuracy.
The unique element in plague seven is found in verse 14ff.
In effect, God is telling Pharaoh that he could have resolved this conflict with one blow but he has lengthened it out in order to spread the word throughout the world that the Lord is God.
In other words, this whole exercise has been one in which God is using Pharaoh to serve his purpose.
God is not just liberating a bunch of oppressed slaves here.
He is doing something much larger.
He is saying something much more important.
Another first in this story is that Pharaoh is offered some measure way out.
If he gives an order then people and livestock will be able to escape the ferocity of the storm.
And some of the Egyptians hear this.
But Pharaoh's stubbornness remains firm.
He will not cave in to the Lord.

He does not issue the order.
And the weather becomes terrifying.
The sky if filled with thunder and lightning and hail.
And the effect is devastating, particularly on vegetation.
But again, Israel is not touched.
In response, Pharaoh sends for Moses.
There is a remarkable confession from him in verse 27.
It seems as though he is beginning to understand the real core of the problem – his own sinfulness.
Then, for the third time, he asks if Moses will intercede for him.
And for the third time, he promises that he will let Israel go.
But there is no depth to his repentance.
He sins again.
He hardens his heart again.
And he does not follow through on his promise and let the people go.

Plague 8: Locusts (10:1-20)

Locust swarms have always been one of the worst scourges to afflict humanity.
And area of one square kilometre can contain 50 million insects, which can, in a single night, devour as much as one hundred thousand tons of vegetation.
Their mass multiplication is fostered by heavy rains and unusually moist conditions.
This plague is introduced with some new features.
In verse 3 we are told that the purpose of the plagues is not only that Pharaoh and Egypt will know the Lord.
It is not only so that Israel will know the Lord.
But it is also so that their descendants might know the Lord.
In verse 1 we are told that God has hardened the hearts of the officials of Pharaoh.
Nevertheless, in verse 7 it is clear that having a heart hardened by God doesn't stop you from seeing sense and stopping the carnage.
For in verse 7 we are told that the kings advisers boldly challenge Pharaoh to see sense.
They tell him that Egypt is ruined.
And that Pharaoh should get rid of the Israelites as soon as he can.
What's more, in verse 10, Pharaoh makes some concessions even before the plague starts.
But he doesn't go far enough.
And so God responds with the locust plague.
The locusts are driven into Egypt by a strong East wind just like the Red Sea is later parted by a strong East wind.
Pharaoh again acknowledges his sin.
This time he goes even further – he asks for forgiveness.
So Moses prays.
And God relents.

He sends a strong west wind and drives the locusts into the Red Sea just like he will later drown the soldiers of Egypt in the Red Sea.
But again God works to harden Pharaoh's heart.
And again he does not let the people go.

Plague 9: Darkness (10:21-29)

And again God responds with Plague 9.
Without warning Moses is to stretch out his hand and darkness will spread over Egypt, a darkness that can be felt.
Now we know that Egyptians would have known something of this experience.
After all, there is a scorching sirocco wind that blows in each spring from Saharan Africa or Arabia.
It envelops the land in thick sand and dust.
It often persists for several days and blackens the sky in its wake.
Whether this is what the Lord uses or some other mechanism, this was worse than any sandstorm ever experienced.
This is darkness that is palpable, that can be touched and felt.
There is no light whatsoever in Egypt.
It was a clear sign to Pharaoh and his people.
For the sun was the supreme god in Egypt.
Egyptians worshipped the Sun.
And worship of the sun god each day was an integral part of palace life.
The sun's daily rising was conceived to be a triumph over the demon god Apophis who was the embodiment of darkness.
As the sun was blocked out for three days the message would have been clear as day.
The gods of Egypt are no match for the God of creation.
He put the sun in the sky.
And he can take the sun out of the sky and return the earth to its primeval state.
And again Pharaoh responds.
But it is still not what God demands.
God hardens his heart again.
And Moses is sent out of his presence.

Announcing Plague 10 (11:1-10)

And with this we end the first 9 plagues.
All that remains is the tenth and worst plague.
It is introduced and announced in Exodus 11:1-10.
Finally, the Lord will strike Pharaoh at the heart of his existence.
God had intended Israel for life and fertility.
But Pharaoh would not allow this.
Pharaoh threatened this life and fertility.
And so now God would strike at Pharaoh in the same place.
The firstborn of Egypt will die.

Summarising the story

The question of structure

Okay, there is the story.

Let's see if we can summarise it.

- Observation 1 – A series of three

	Plague	Forewarning	Time of warning	Words of instruction	Agent of action
First Series	1. Blood 2. Frogs 3. Gnats	Yes Yes No	'in the morning' none none	'Station yourself' 'Go to Pharaoh' none	Aaron Aaron Aaron
Second Series	4. Flies 5. Pestilence 6. Boils	Yes Yes No	'in the morning' none none	'Station yourself' 'Go to Pharaoh' none	None None None
Third Series	7. Hail 8. Locusts 9. Darkness	Yes Yes No	'in the morning' none none	'Station yourself' 'Go to Pharaoh' none	Moses Moses Moses
Climax	10. Death of firstborn	Yes	none	none	None

- Observation 2 – Trends within the stories

	Magicians reproduce plague	Magicians or court begs	Pharaoh begs or capitulates	Pharaoh hardens heart	Pharaoh's heart becomes hard	God hardens Pharaoh's heart	Distinction between Israelites and Egyptians	Early morning meeting	Meeting in Palace	Aaron's staff/hand	Moses' staff/hand
Blood	✓				✓			✓		✓	
Frogs	✓		✓	✓						✓	
Gnats		✓			✓					✓	
Flies			✓				✓	✓			
Pestilence					✓		✓		✓		
Boils						✓	✓				
Hail		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓
Locusts			✓			✓			✓		✓
Darkness			✓			✓	✓				✓
Firstborn			✓			✓	✓				✓

- What do we learn from this structure?

It's clear, isn't it, that these stories are highly structured.

There are clear patterns in God's activity.

What is happening here is not just random.

These are not just a whole series of natural disasters haphazardly piled one upon another.

This is the planned activity of God.

God stands behind them.

They are acts of God, not acts of nature.

They are driven by a divine intention.

They are part of the plans and purposes of God.

The purpose of the story

- On the surface

On the surface, I think that we can see the purpose of the story as having two parts.

First, the story is about God educating Pharaoh and his own people.

Pharaoh has said that he does not know the Lord.

However, at the end of the story he will know God and his power (cf. 14:3).

The story we look at today is about the process of learning about this God.

However, the Exodus story also makes clear that the Israelites also don't know much about the Lord.

Exodus 10:2 tells us that part of the purpose of the Exodus is that Israel may know that God is the Lord.

Exodus 14:31 tells us that after the miracle at the sea, 'the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him.'

Second, this story is about the greatness of the God of Israel.

Time and time again we hear about the gods of the Egyptians.

And time and time again we are told that they are impotent and powerless before the God of Israel.

The God of Israel is the one supreme, sovereign God of all creation.

The Egyptians worship the natural world as gods.

But God knows that they are not gods.

They are simply the forces of nature.

And he takes these so-called gods, the natural phenomenon, and uses them for his own purposes.

He alone is worthy of the title 'God'.

- At a deeper, theological level

However, I don't think these themes are the core of what is being said in these chapters.

You see, I think there is a strong, deep, theological message being conveyed here.

Let me explain.

I want to go back to where we started.

Remember Genesis 1.

In Genesis 1 God creates the world.

It is clear that whatever else God does, he takes a chaotic structure and turns it into an ordered structure.

As a result of God's creative activity everything has its right place.

The sky has its place.

The sun has its place.

The creatures have their place.
Humans have their place.
And God has his place.
But Pharaoh has taken it upon himself to publicly oppose God's will.
He has engaged in anti-life and anti-blessing policies.
He is an agent of chaos and disorder.
God design for life and order is being shaken.
His very purposes in creation are being threatened.
His mission toward the whole world is being subverted.
And so God must publicly react.
This is what the plague narratives are about.
All of creation is caught up in this cosmic conflict between God and Pharaoh.
Pharaoh has demonstrated that he does not like the way God has ordered his created world.
And so God gives him what he wants.
Instead of water bringing life as is God's desire and intention, water will bring death.

Instead of being in their proper order as God created them in Genesis 1, diseases and people, and animals will run amok.
Insects and amphibians will swarm out of control.
Instead of humans having dominion over the animals, they will have dominion over humans.
Hailstones will be so large as to shatter trees.
Specks of dust will become gnats.
Instead of light being separated from darkness, as is God's desire and intention, darkness and chaos will remain.
The world will return to its pre-creation state.
If Pharaoh wants a world without God's order that is exactly what he will get.
But even within the plague narratives, we can see that God does this work reluctantly.
His real desire is for life and for creation order.
And so time and time again he removes the curses Pharaoh has brought upon his people.
Time and time again God overcomes the chaos and brings creation order.
For this is his desire.
It is his desire for his people.
His desire for Egypt.
And it is his desire for the whole world.

What's in it for us?

This is where this point comes home with crashing significance for us.
You see, this passage tells us about God's great love for his world.
God's purposes for his world are not destruction.
They are not judgment.
They are not the plague.
God wants life for us.
This is what he made the world for.
Now if we want to oppose this purpose.
If we want to live under our own order and our own rule, God will give us what we want.
This is what the Bible calls hell.
The place where God's order and blessing and constraint no longer prevail.
But this is not his desire.
His desire is for life and fullness and blessing.
And he will bring that about for us no matter what it takes.

And he will oppose any who try and take it from us.
I think, therefore, that this passage helps us to understand such passages as Romans 8:18ff.
Let's read them together.