

The plagues: God versus the gods

If you are just joining us today, we are in the midst of study in the book of Exodus. One of the most foundational stories in the Old Testament.

So, if you have a bible with you, turn with me to **Exodus ch.7-11**.

But before we get into the story, **let's pray...**

Well, if you've got Exodus 7 open before you, or if you are tracking with us in this study, you'll know that we're going to be talking about the **infamous plagues** that God brought on the ancient Egyptians who had enslaved the Israelites for 430 years.

Now many of us know something of this dramatic moment from Israel's history, but have you ever stopped to ask **why?**

Why 10 plagues? Why turn the Nile river into blood? Why send a plague of frogs? Why destroy the crops? Why cause three days of darkness?

Why does God rescue the Israelites by sending **10 plagues** on the Egyptians? Why not just make all the Egyptians blind for a day, or sleepy, so the Israelites could just walk away?

Or – just kill all the Egyptians in one foul swoop?

Honestly, God can do anything. So, **why these plagues?** What was God up to? What was God seeking to do **in and through** the plagues?

That's what I want us to get at this morning.

And I ask the question, not just because it's **intriguing**, but because I'm convinced that God is up to something similar in all of our lives. Not that

God is sending us plagues, but **God is** at work in our lives and our world *with the same **end** in mind.*

So, **what is that end?**

What was God seeking to do in and through the plagues?

Well, the answer to this question isn't that hard to find. Simply listening to what God Himself **says** about the plagues, as they unfold, tells us much of his reasoning.

But an understanding of the religious life of the Egyptians makes this **all the more *clear*.**

So before we get into ***the story*** of Exodus 7-11, let's begin by exploring **the story behind this story:** the religious life of the Egyptians.

From what you know of ancient Egyptian history and culture (king tut, the pyramids), would you not agree that the Egyptians were *very religious people?*

Some historians would actually describe ancient Egypt as one of the **most religious societies ever.**

The history books are **filled** with evidence of this... In truth, it would be hard to separate religion from almost any aspect of ancient Egyptian culture. Their life – private and collective – was profoundly shaped by the worship of the gods – not just one, but **many gods**. They were, what we'd call, **polytheists**. They had **many gods**.

I found a website that gave an **alphabetized** list and description of the gods of the ancient Egyptians, and, suffice it to say, there were at least **7** gods starting with the letter **A** (Amon/AmonRe, Amset, Anubis, Anuket, Apis, Aten and Atum). One source lists at least **58** gods. Another **700**.

Now, in truth, not all of these gods were worshipped at the time of Israel's enslavement in Egypt, but many of them were.

Ancient Egyptian life was consumed with and driven by the worship of the gods. Life for the Egyptians had everything to do with the gods – specifically seeking to **appease** the gods (*the sun-god, the river-god, the fertility gods, the goddess of childbirth, the god of the crops, the god that protects the livers of those who are deceased, and on and on*). Daily life was all about **appeasing** the gods in the hope that they would bless you and not make life miserable for you, or your family.

So, without trying to list and explain all **58** or **700** gods in the Egyptian pantheon, I want to take a few minutes to name a few notable Egyptian gods that were worshiped at the time of Israel's enslavement.

1. **First and foremost, the Egyptians worshipped Re or Ra** the **sun-god** and creator god. Re or **Amon-Re** was chief among the gods. Egyptians believed that the sun-god Re was in constant battle with the god of chaos, and so every morning when the sun would rise again, they would know that Re, the sun-god, reigned supreme.

2. **They worshipped the Pharaoh himself (and his sons).** They were considered gods. Every Pharaoh was perceived to be the earthly descendent of Re, the sun god, or Amon-Re [hence the famous Pharaoh Tutenkhamen's

name literally means, "in the image of Amon".] Throughout Egypt there would be idols in the image of the Pharaoh, or idols in the form of a cobra - which was another symbol of the Pharaoh. [We see it here on Tutenkhamen's headpiece.]

3. they **worshipped Hapi** - the god of the **Nile river**, also considered the god of creation and fertility. Each year the Nile would overflow and nourish the land of the Egyptians - and bring life. So they would often go to the river to worship - to offer sacrifices to **Hapi**.

4. they **worshipped Heqt** (or Heket) - depicted on the right with a **frog's** head. Heqt was the goddess of childbirth.

5. They **worshipped Seth/Seb** - depicted here by a rather long-snouted, stiff-eared beast that vaguely reminds one of a wolf or aardvark. Seth or Seb was the earth god, the god of the **dust**.

6. They **worshipped Hathor** - depicted as a goddess or cow bearing a solar disc between horns. Hathor was the mother goddess - of love and sexuality. a fertility god - considered the mother of all Pharaohs.

7. They **worshipped Afis/Apis** - son of Hathor, depicted as a bull.

8. They **worshipped Sekhmet** - lion-headed goddess of plagues...

9. They **worshipped Nut** - the sky goddess...

And on and on the list goes... The Egyptians had **many gods, who all** commanded their loyalty, submission and service.

Life with these gods would have been exhausting.

They put their trust in these gods. They worshipped and served them. They depended upon them. They looked to these them for guidance, protection, provision, help and blessing.

Makes me think of the song we sang earlier - "**He is Yahweh**".

According to Pharaoh and the Egyptians,

Amon is moving on the waters and holding up the moon. **Re** is peeling back the darkness with the burning light of noon. **Seth** is standing on the mountains. Pharaoh is on the earth below. Nut is bigger than the heavens ... and no one is the lover of our soul.

They looked to **Afis** to make them happy, and to give them peace. They looked to **Thoth** for comfort, to turn the bitter into sweet. They looked to **Hathor** to stir up their passions, and fill them with life. And they looked to **Isis** and **Min** to meet their needs.

Which begs the question: Who or what do I look to? To make me happy ... to give me peace ... to bring me comfort and turn the bitter into sweet? Who or what do I turn to to stir my passions, to make me feel alive, to satisfy up my hungers and give me what I need?

The Egyptians had their idols, their gods – many gods whom they feared and worshipped, served and trusted.

Not surprisingly then, we read in **Exodus 5:1** (we talked about this passage last Sunday) that when Moses and Aaron went, for the first time, to confront the Pharaoh, saying, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the wilderness.'"

Pharaoh **responded saying**, "**Who is the LORD, that I should obey him** and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."

That's an important verse for understanding **the plagues**. Pharaoh did not know the LORD - which is to say, he didn't **know and acknowledge** YAHWEH, the LORD, the God of the Hebrews as **God over all**.

As far as he knew, **Yahweh was just a tribal god** – the god of the Hebrews, who, if anything, only had power over Israel. *But Yahweh didn't control the heavens. Yahweh didn't cause the sun to shine. Yahweh didn't give rain for Pharaoh's crops and bless him with children.*

According to Pharaoh, **all that** was in the hands of **Re, and Amon, Hapi, Hathor and Sekhmet**. These were the gods who reigned. They were the ones who held all of life in their hands, who caused the sun to shine, the rain to fall, the crops to grow and wives to give birth. There were the gods who could bless and curse...

And consequently, these were the gods in whom they put their trust – the gods they worshiped and served...

"Who is the LORD – Yahweh - that I should obey him and let Israel go? I don't know Yahweh... I know Re, and Amon, and Min and Heqt... to them alone will I bow."

Ok, so – with **some** understanding now of the gods of the Egyptians, let's walk through the plagues and I think it will become evident what's going on here – and why God sent these plagues...

7:10f – Shirley mentioned this last Sunday. As something of a prologue to the plague narrative – Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and, in his presence, Aaron throws down his staff and it becomes **a snake** [note the symbolism - the **snake/cobra** is the symbol of the Pharaoh's divinity and rule].

So, the Pharaoh's magicians are summoned and they do the same thing, but as they watch, we're told "**Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.**"

Do you see what God was doing here – in and through this?

"**Who is the LORD,** that I should obey him?" Pharaoh has said.

God's response,

"**I AM ... not you.** I am the LORD ... I alone am God over all. Not you. Put your trust in me."

But we're told that Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them.

7:14f - So, the LORD sends Moses to meet Pharaoh the next morning down by the Nile River [*note the significance – this is a place of worship*].

And he tells Moses to say: **(v.16)**

*"The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened. This is what the LORD says: **By this you will know [what?]**. By this you will know that **I am the LORD**: With the staff in my hand I will strike the **Nile**, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink from the Nile."*

And in the presence of Pharaoh and all his officials, Aaron struck the Nile with his staff and all the water was changed to blood.

Can you see what God's doing – in and through this?

In turning the water of the Nile into blood, YAHWEH, the God of the Hebrews, was exposing **Hapi**, the god of the Nile as powerless, impotent, nothing... unable to deliver on its promise... unable to give and sustain life.

And revealing YAHWEH as Lord over the Nile – **and Egypt.**

So Pharaoh's magicians copied this.

Which, when you think about it, is stupid - ***as if they needed more bloody water!*** A real show of power would have been to make the water clean, ***but they couldn't do that.***

"Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?" Pharaoh has said.

God's response?

"I AM. LORD of All. Not you ... and not **hapi** (the so-called river god). I am the LORD... I'm the Giver of life. Put your trust in me."

But Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not listen to them.

Ch. 8:1f - 7 days pass, and God sends Moses and Aaron back to Pharaoh, **saying:**

*"This is what the LORD says, 'Let my people go, so that they may worship me... If you refuse, I will send a plague of **frogs** on your whole country. [FROGS] The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed, into the houses of your officials and on your people, and into your ovens and kneading troughs... "*

(v.6) So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land.

And the Egyptians magicians copied this... Which again is just ridiculous. ***As if they need more frogs.***

Finally, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron saying, *"Pray to the Lord to take the frogs away and I'll let your people go."* He seems to be beginning to acknowledge that Yahweh has **authority**. So Moses replies, "pick the date!" "Tomorrow." And **Moses explains, "It will be as you say, (WHY?) so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God."**

And Moses left and prayed to the LORD and the next day the frogs all died.

Do you see what God was doing – in and through this?

"**Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?**" Pharaoh has said.

God's response,

"**I AM... LORD of all... Not you, not hapi** (the so-called river god), not **Heqt** (the frog-headed god, the so-called giver of life). I am the LORD... I am the Giver of life, and the sustainer of all life. Why do you trust, depend upon, run to gods who are powerless and unable to save?
I am the LORD... **Put your trust in Me...**"

But as soon as the frogs were gone, **Pharaoh hardened** his heart again.

8:16 – Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the ground' [**DUST**] and throughout the land of Egypt the dust will become gnats."
And he did this... and gnats came on people and animals. All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats. But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, **they could not.**

"**Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?**" Pharaoh had said.

God's response,

"**I AM YAHWEH... Lord of All...** Not you, or hapi (the so-called river god), or Heqt (the so-called giver of life), or **Seth** (the so-called earth god – the god of dust). I AM... I am YAHWEH... I AM **God over all.**
Why do you trust in and depend upon gods that are not gods at all? Why do you worship and slave to appease gods that are powerless to save you, gods that can't deliver on their promises?
Put your trust in me. I alone am God."

"But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen."

And so God **kept sending plagues**, each time exposing the gods of Egypt as false-gods (powerless, impotent, nothing) – unworthy of their attention – much less their worship – and in the process, revealing Himself

as the **one LORD of all**, who alone **is** worthy to be worshipped and served. Who alone has the power to give life and take it away. Who alone is Sovereign over creation.

But again and again Pharaoh's heart is hard and he will not listen and surrender in trust.

8:20 - So, the **LORD** sends a plague of **flies**, and the land was ruined by the flies. And in response, **Pharaoh** tries to strike a bargain, but once the plague ends, he hardens his heart again.

9:1 - So, the **LORD** sends a plague on the animals. Again, **note the significance** – **Hathor and Afis, bovine gods** – fertility gods – can do nothing. They are powerless to save.

Yet Pharaoh's heart was hard and wouldn't let the people go.

9:8 - So, the **LORD** sends a plague of boils that covered both people and animals. Which not only exposed Sekhmet, Afis, and Hathor as powerless – but also caused the Egyptians to be unable to fulfill their religious duties, to bring their sacrifices to their gods, because the boils made them ritually unclean.

"Who is the LORD, that I should obey him?" Pharaoh had said.

God's response,

*"I AM ... I am the LORD **over all...** Turn from your false-gods, your gods who are powerless to save you and put your hope in me ... **Look to me for life...** "*

But still Pharaoh's heart was hard, and he would not listen.

Ch. 9:13 – And this is a key. Here the gospel begins to ring out!

*Then the LORD said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, (**why?**) so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.*

For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. But I have raised you up [I've spared you] for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

You still set yourself against my people and will not let them go. Therefore, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the days it was founded till now. Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every person and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die.

Can you hear the grace & goodness of Yahweh's heart in this?

As **God makes very clear** in this moment: **God's purpose** with the plagues was **not** to destroy the Egyptians, but **to save them** – **to save them from idolatry** – to save them from putting their trust in false gods... false gods who were powerless to save them... And to **lead them** to know and fear, to worship and serve Yahweh – the One True LORD of all – who alone holds all of life in His hands... who alone can save and give life.

You can hear it **in v.19**, where Yahweh promises to send a hailstorm that will destroy everything out in the open, but then **instructs** Pharaoh to **bring everyone in. WHY? Because YAHWEH wants to save them – and not just the Israelites, but the Egyptians... Do we see that?**

"Bow to Me, Pharaoh, and save your people..."

Yahweh's heart and intent was **not** to destroy the Egyptians, but **to save them** – to save them from putting their trust in false-gods.

Ok, but why? Why does this matter so much to God? Why does God HATE idolatry so much? Is God jealous for our attention & worship?

Well, **yes** – Yes HE IS – but not in a selfish way. In the most **loving** way. In the **best** way imaginable...

Because God knows - *more than we ever could* - that **false-gods can never save**. As we said a few weeks back: **idols never save, they only enslave**. They promise life, but they can never ultimately deliver on their promise. They always ask for more than they could ever give...

And in case we're prone to think that their worship of idols hadn't caused any real harm **until YAHWEH showed up and brought the plagues** – **we need to THINK AGAIN!**

Because the oppression, suffering and enslavement of the Israelites was the **direct** result of Egypt's worship.

Because, as God tells us again and again in scripture:

we become like that which we worship.

Let me read a portion of **Psalms 135** where this is laid out so clearly...

Psalms 135:15-18.

*"The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. **Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.**"*

In other words, **we become like that which we worship.**

So, when we worship idols – false gods that cannot see or hear or know or care – **we end up becoming like them. We end up losing our humanity.** We end up becoming *in*-human, treating others in ways God never intended. *Which is exactly what we see in the enslavement of the Israelites.*

This was not a random, or purely economic decision on the part of the Egyptians. ***This was the natural result of their worship. The fruit of their worship.***

As the history books account, the **gods** of the Egyptians were selfish, oppressive, conniving, indifferent, treating humans solely as a workforce to meet their ever-changing divine whims, needs and inadequacies...

It should not be surprising that, with gods like this, the Egyptians lived like this. ***They become like the gods they worshipped*** – ultimately oppressing and enslaving others (and themselves)...

But Pharaoh continued to refuse to let Israel go, so Yahweh sent a plague of **locusts** to destroy whatever little was left after the hail.

Once again, YAHWEH showed the Egyptian gods of the crops and specifically, **Nut**, the sky goddess, to be powerless... false-gods... unable to deliver...

But Pharaoh's heart was heard, so in a **9th plague**, Yahweh sent **darkness**. Three days of utter darkness...

In The Book of God, an incredible re-imagining of this story, Walter Wangarin Jr, describes how through all these plagues, Pharaoh might have arisen each day still with **one consolation** – that **RE – the Sun God** – the Chief god of Egypt – the god in whose image the Pharaoh himself had been made – **RE – the Sun God – was still on His Throne...**

Each day, as the sun rose, Pharaoh's confidence – in Re and in Himself – remained...

Until the day came when Pharaoh found himself awakening to **complete darkness.**

Exodus 10:21 – *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward the sky so that darkness spreads over Egypt—darkness that can be felt."*

Imagine Pharaoh awakening that day – **to a darkness so deep it can** be felt – to the devastating realization that the sun has not risen – and in this, that **Re was not on His Throne.**

For **three days** – three days – Pharaoh sat in darkness, contemplating his response...

But his heart was hardened.

Now, if you know the story, you'll know that this is one of the few times where the **LORD** himself is the One who hardens Pharaoh's heart.

Which is a disturbing thought to many of us.

Until we realize or remember that Pharaoh himself **was a god of Egypt** – the last god to be exposed as powerless and unable to save.

"Who is the LORD that I should obey Him?" Pharaoh had said.

Not simply because he didn't know the LORD – but because he himself was a god in Egypt – Lord over Egypt – the son of RE... The god who rises each morning to shine across all the land.

But here, in hardening Pharaoh's heart, YAHWEH, shows Pharaoh himself to be nothing – nothing but a man made to know and trust and worship YAHWEH – and, in this, live... and be a source of life to others...

And so, the consequences of Pharaoh's idolatrous claim reach its climax in the final plague – the plague on the Firstborn – which we will delve more deeply into next Sunday.

But for now, let us simply acknowledge that in these final plagues, Pharaoh himself is exposed as yet another false-god – like all the rest – unable to save, unable to deliver on his promise, unable to give life to anyone – even his own son.

All because he will not bow to anyone. His worship of himself and the gods of Egypt has only led to death and destruction – for the Israelites – and now for the Egyptians...

So, what about us?

In whom do we trust? Or in what? Who or what do **we** worship?

In whom or in what do **we** place our hope for life and salvation?

Going back to the words that we sang earlier:

Who is moving on the waters? *Who is holding up the moon? Who is peeling back the darkness... with the burning light of noon? Who is standing on the mountains? Who is on the earth below? Who is bigger than the heavens ... And the lover of our soul?*

I suspect many of us would give the same answer. It's **God**. It's **Yahweh**, the God of Israel, who has revealed Himself to us in **Jesus**.

He alone is God and He is our God.

But what about the second verse, cause that's where, I think, our true allegiance is exposed and proved.

Who is He that makes me happy? *Who is He that gives me peace? Who is He that brings me comfort? And turns the bitter into sweet? Who is stirring up my passions? Who is rising up in me? Who is filling up my hunger with everything I need?*

Those are the questions that expose the true affection, hunger and allegiance of our hearts and lives.

In whom or what do we seek happiness? In whom or what do we seek peace? In whom or what do we seek comfort - to turn the bitter into sweet? Who or what stirs our passions? Who or what do we look to satisfy our hungers with what we need?

Just as God, in holy love, sought to name and expose the false-gods of Egypt and lead the Egyptians to the saving grace of repentance and faith, **God is always and actively seeking, in holy love, to do the same with us – with you – with me...**

To open our eyes to the false-gods that we worship and the destructive end of this worship... **To awaken us** to the glory and goodness

of God Himself, and **to invite us** to the grace of repentance and faith – that we might turn from our subtle or not-so-subtle idols **and be saved...**

And our model in this is actually some of Pharaoh's own officials – who, in response to God's warning of the 7th plague – the plague of hail that would destroy everything and everyone left out in the fields – we read in

ch.9:20,

"Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside."

They turned from trusting idols – and themselves – to worship and obey YAHWEH alone as LORD of all – & it ended up meaning life for others.

Their servants were saved.

Because their repentance and faith – led them to worship YAHWEH – the God who saves...

Who is the LORD that I should obey Him?

He is YAHWEH – the LORD of all.

Come worship Him – and be saved.