

# A River of Blood

Exodus 7:14-25

The Nile represented various gods to the Egyptians—fertility, growth, abundance—because it transformed their desert into a fruitful land. They made this gift into an idol, and like all sin, idolatry leads to death. What we refer to as the ten plagues God calls “My signs and wonders (7:3). He ends the reign of death in Egypt beginning with the river.

## Three Cycles of Plagues

Pharaoh’s heart is hard, so God instructs Moses to meet him in the morning by the river and tell him he’ll know that God is Yahweh when He strikes the waters in the river with His rod and they become blood. The fish will die, the river will stink, and the Egyptians will be thirsty (vv15-18). Beginning now, the Lord will strike Egypt in a deliberate and progressive way. There are three cycles with three plagues each, following a pattern that’s basic to way the Bible describes the world: the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth. This encompasses everything, just as “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth” (Phil 2:10). The plagues progress from water to earth to sky. God begins with water, turning the Nile into blood. Similarly the fourth and seventh plagues, flies (associated with the water) and hail (water from heaven) are attacks on water. The second, fifth, and eighth plagues are attacks on the land: frogs, livestock, and locusts. The third cycle attacks the heavens/skies, including the third, sixth, and ninth plagues: lice, boils (from ashes that Moses scatters into the heavens), and darkness that is felt in the atmosphere. Just as God created the world with the heavens, the earth, and the waters under the earth, so He will de-create the world of Egypt. The cycles take time and get more severe as they go. The first three are mostly annoying—water, frogs, and lice. The second cycle of flies, cattle, and boils impact the physical and economic well-being of the nation. Hail claims lives of men and beasts, and locusts eat anything left in the land. Darkness is followed by the final plague of justice that decimates every house. Just as Egypt claimed the life of baby boys born to Israel, so the life of their firstborn would be taken. In the first plague of every cycle (one, four, seven), Moses went early in the morning to Pharaoh, indicating a new “day”, a new opportunity for all the Egyptians to turn to the Lord who is gracious and longsuffering. The gods will be destroyed and Israel set free, but this also gives time for anyone who is willing to repent to do so. It is always time to turn to Him.

## Yahweh Over the gods

“Thus says Yahweh: By this you shall know that I am Yahweh” (v17). We don’t know for sure what Pharaoh is doing at the water (v15), but chances are good that he’s worshipping a god. The Nile is arguably the biggest (along with the Amazon) river in the world and one of the most beautiful. Khnum was the guardian god of the Nile, Osiris’ bloodstream consisted partly of the Nile, Nu was god of life in the river, and greatest of all, Hapi was worshipped as the giver of life: “Who brings food, who is abundant of provisions... Everything that has come into being is through his power”, as one hymn put it. Hapi was a hermaphrodite with the face of a bearded man, female breasts, and a pregnant belly. He reproduced on his own in the annual flooding of

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the river, a birth that overflowed to nourish the land where it only rains a few times a year. They called the river after him, and when the water becomes blood and the fish die and stink, God is saying something. Everyone understood what was happening: “For the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, whom the Lord had killed among them. Also on their gods the Lord had executed judgments” (Num. 33:4); “For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the Lord” (Ex. 12:12) If Yahweh is God, then Hapi is not. The 80 or so gods and goddesses of Egypt represented the water, land, and sky, the very thing God forbade in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image--any likeness of anything that in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them” (Ex. 20:4-5). Idolatry is worshiping a created thing with honor due to God alone, making gods out of that which are not. Aaron stretches his rod over the waters in the land of Egypt and they become blood, “both in wood and stone” (v20). Some translators think this refers to vessels of water, but it’s likely these refer to “idols which were among them—wood and stone and silver and gold” (Deut. 29:17). Idols demand blood sacrifice, and God remembered 80 years earlier when the Nile ran red with the blood of Israel’s baby boys. He avenges their death at Passover and begins to destroy the idols now.

## Reading the Signs

The river and land are filled with blood, so what to the Egyptian magicians do? They make it worse! They turn more water into blood, and Pharaoh hardens his heart. He is not moved (vv22-23). When people destroy themselves willingly, judgment has been established in their hearts. Some moderns explain these plagues away in terms of natural phenomena, but Pharaoh explained them away through false spirituality. The Egyptians would rather dig wells than turn to the Lord even after a week (vv24-25). The first cycle of plagues is the only one that also falls on the Israelites. After this the land of Goshen is spared (e.g. 8:23; 9:4; 9:26). But as part of a rebellious people, Israel deals with thirst and the stench coming from the Nile, like the stench they are in the nostrils of Egypt (5:21). As Christians we bear the burden of living where we do and all the folly we bring upon ourselves. We have the opportunity to see God’s hand in it and receive His mercy. Every hardship, every trial, every bit suffering and pain is used by God to teach, bless, and sanctify you if you are in Christ. Before you believed, God was chastening and bringing you to the end of yourself and all of your hard-hearted unbelief. God’s mercy is here even in misery because He the God of exodus. Apart from Him, suffering is meaningless and hardening. Yahweh turned water into blood, but Jesus our Savior, because He bore our sins on the tree, turned water into wine. Therefore we look forward in hope.

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