

God Over the Waters

Exodus 7:14 – 8:19

Maybe some of you would consider a lake dotted with venomous snakes and a few sand dunes being kissed by the currents of the Mississippi River as odd playgrounds. But they had their part to play in my younger years. They were places of discovery, beauty, and danger. In those waters where I often swam with family and friends, I also fished. My brother hunted. My mom worked on a riverboat and waitressed at one of the restaurants by the lake shore. Townships and communities that persist hold a lot of memories. Barges still pass through our area headed down to the gulf or up into the heartland. Both the lake and the river have helped to sustain many mouths, and, as we might expect, taken lives most unexpectedly. Waters are like that. In a very real sense, Reelfoot and the Mississippi define the whole area of the most northwestern parts of our state.

The present-day effect on humans and the historical importance of that stretch of river, along with “earthquake lake” yawning over two counties, might have some similarities to the Nile, but they are poor comparisons. Egyptian geography was and is dominated by one simple reality: the Nile sustains life on an incredibly large scale and has done so for millennia.¹ The Greek historian Herodotus remarked, “Egypt is a land acquired by the Egyptians, [but] given them by the river.”² And they lived as if the Nile had gifted them itself. It was more than the hub of commerce and the source of sustaining them on the most basic levels of subsisting—they made it an object of worship.³ In a 30-minute sermon I don’t have the skill or time to adequately frame the scale of the Nile’s day-to-day importance and the richness it’s provided for so long. I don’t want to sell it short, but as with all impressive structures in creation, it too must bow to its Creator. Every fluid ounce of every significant body of water has a LORD to which it answers. A text such as ours this morning has *water-logged* us with such conviction.

In some sense we can say that these first three plagues are Nile-centric, meaning that the Nile is featured, with its creaturely residents and dependents subpoenaed to suddenly appear for a great purpose. By the will and power of God, this artery of water is turned into blood. Aquatic amphibians and insects which were bred in, born out of, and bustling about the Nile make their own *exodus* to places they wouldn’t typically find themselves. Though frogs in kneading bowls was a terrible nuisance, they jumped exactly where they were meant to.⁴ He is LORD over all His works.⁵

I. The First Plague: Blood

One reason we thought to give you these plagues in threes is because of the pattern you might have noticed as you’ve read through Exodus yourself. Here, Moses approaches Pharaoh *in the morning* as he is going out into the water, presumably for the standard self-care reasons. The same morning confrontations takes place in 8:20 and 9:13 as a kind of introduction to each new set of 3 plagues. These are clean divisions inserted by Moses that exceed the presentation of merely raw facts. The

¹ Barry Beitzel, *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Pentateuch*, 396.

² Alex Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 117.

³ Phillip Ryken, *Exodus*, 215.

⁴ I doubt that any of us have ever witnessed such a “ribbiting” scene.

⁵ Psalm 29:10, “The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.”

three cycles slam Egypt in succession and seem to build to the finale of the last plague, exposing these Egyptian gods' inabilities to control the water, the land, and the air.⁶

But there is more here than a sensible structure and exposure to what is false. When you hover over chapters 7-15, we can see that all these signs and wonders fall squarely within the context of creation theology. At creation, God made rivers to curl through landscapes which have not stopped corresponding to what is good for humans. He placed in and around them life, crowded with plants and animals that are dependent on those waters. He fashioned creatures that hop, slither, and flutter, and He built into them a symbiotic relationship with rivers, lakes, streams, and oceans. We still observe this order, beauty, and harmony throughout the world to some degree. God saw all that He made, and it was good, we read somewhere. But at this juncture in Exodus, the judgment that begins to unfold is what one scholar coined a kind of "de-creation"⁷ of Egypt.⁸ From this first sign to the last, creation will essentially come undone, turning on the Egyptians. Instead of being a recipient of the good in creation, chaos ensues to their harm and horror. And each of these first three plagues are, as stated earlier, centered on their venerated waters of the Nile. God will govern the chaos in His creation.

But this is not all he's overseeing. Pharaoh's heart is not operating outside of God's oversight and influence either. God is, verse 14, diagnosing Pharaoh's very soul and sharing this diagnosis with Moses. "***Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.***" The long game for the LORD is to have His way with Pharaoh to a purpose, a purpose reiterated by Paul to the church at Rome. Romans 9:17-18, "*For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.'* [18] *So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.*" And just in case anyone wants to get saucy with the LORD over how He handled Pharaoh's so-called "freedom," Paul continues in Romans 9, "*You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'* [20] *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?'* [21] *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?*"⁹ As we watch power plays develop in our own day, this is something we shouldn't ignore.

Divine instructions, then, are given, running from verse 14-19. God tells Moses and Moses relays the instructions to Aaron. And both unhesitatingly obey. ***[20] Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded.*** The went to Pharaoh, commanded him to release God's people, and when he refused, God brought about this first spectacle of sovereignty. Moses' previous impulsiveness, hesitation, and presumption faded. A readied servant is standing before a mighty king of earth for the sake of making the mightiest King of all known. Verse 20, ***In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, [Aaron] lifted up the staff and struck...the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned to blood.***

What's the LORD doing here? Again, why the Nile? Well, one way God works in the world is to fundamentally alter the value judgments of human beings. A mark of the curse of sin in us is that

⁶ Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*, 208.

⁷ L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*, 44.

⁸ John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, 113-117 (As quoted by Ryken on 240-241 of his commentary on Exodus).

⁹ Romans 9:19-21

we have terrible trouble appraising and weighing all kinds of things. Without direction from God's Word, this person, place, thing, or idea is more important than it should be, and that person, place, thing, or idea is not important enough. For Egypt and its citizens, this waterway stood alone in importance, stagnating their whole way of life with idolatry. From the deepest depths of their historical archives, ancient Egypt, including Moses' day, had been pantheistic (having many gods to which they paid homage). So, it's not surprising that the Nile was itself worshiped as a god.¹⁰

Thus, this confrontation taking place on the banks of the Nile was not a personal crusade by Moses or a power-play clash. God was expressing to Egypt that their most prized landmark and what they believed to be their central source of life was a mere puddle in Yahweh's hand.¹¹ What they exalted and had for hundreds of years worshiped, in an instant God humbled and altered for His glory. In other words, if this all-encompassing "god" of a river could be controlled under the reigns of the true Sovereign, then by extension all the "gods" were put on notice from this point forward.

And this blood was, 7:21, *throughout all the land of Egypt*. Aaron stretched out the staff over *rivers, canals, ponds, pools*. And just in case something's not covered, blood even courses *through vessels of wood and stone*. How alarming were the effects of having blood in every place you're accustomed to having water, not least among the list of upsetting aspects were hygiene and hydration, again according to verse 21.

The magicians were up to their old tricks again we see in verse 22. On a small scale, they imitated the miracle of blood, and for Pharoah that sufficed. Any heart set against the LORD tends to latch on to anything that sets itself to show Him other than what He claims or reveals. You've heard them. "If God is good, how is there evil in the world?" "Chimpanzees have 98% of human DNA. They are our real ancestors." "There is no empirical evidence for God's existence, therefore..." In this case, though the comparison between turning a whole waterway system such as the Nile River into blood and whatever these pagan magicians did was no comparison. Nevertheless, Pharoah's stubborn unbelief prevailed.

II. The Second Plague: Frogs

The last verse of chapter 7 tells us that Egypt had to endure blood as water for 7 days. But the clear implication in the details beginning in chapter 8 was that Pharoah once again turned away from obeying the voice of Yahweh. The result? God tells His servants what to say to Egypt's king. Verse 3, *The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls*.

The language here is meant to convey that none escaped the infestation. The psalmist, with reference to our text, reflected, "*Their land swarmed with frogs, even in the chambers of their kings.*"¹² Pharoah, for all his luxury, would not evade these excreting, croaking, and reeking amphibians. When I was a young boy, every summer near my house a fence line developed deep cracks in the soil. These cracks were home to boatloads of common toads.¹³ More than one summer

¹⁰ Stuart, 131.

¹¹ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 197-198.

¹² Psalm 105:30

¹³ Either the American Toad or the Fowler's Toad, they both look similar and I can't recall which ones I collected.

my curiosity led me to collect hundreds of them inside of empty bread bags. And even though that was around 40 years ago, I remember the very distinct stench. Yet, a stench was just part of the misery of this hoard rising out of the Nile. If they are around *houses* and in *beds*, stepping on them and rolling onto them caused other unique and unpleasant problems. To show the pervasiveness of the frogs' presence, Moses employs the word *swarm* in verse 3. If that sounds vaguely familiar, we see this imagery used positively in the creation account in Genesis 1.¹⁴ And, you might remember that it's the same idea we find in Exodus 1 when the Israelites were increasing greatly under the nose of Pharoah and his citizenry. If the Egyptians believed that the Hebrew numbers were a kind of threat, then the LORD exerted a bit of irony here.

But more than irony, Yahweh was expressing His superiority over another object of worship for the Egyptian. *Heqet* was the frog-goddess, whom they worshipped as the goddess of fertility.¹⁵ She was the life-giver, and the sustainer of women in childbirth. The ancient world didn't have the luxury of modern medicine to help women have babies. Giving birth was always a life-threatening event, so for Egyptians, appealing to Heqet was just the thing you did. *Heqet*'s rise to prominence wasn't built upon worthiness or genuine power, but upon humanity's fears and their desires to control their circumstances. It's possible that perhaps the LORD is giving a rebuking nod to the not-too-distant past occurrence of the midwives and the sinister decree to kill the firstborn sons of Israel. What is clearer, however, is that He was showing His Lordship over this so-called god associated with the Nile.

Yet again, the magicians imitated the miracle in some way according to verse 7, perhaps having some effect on Pharoah. But the millions of frogs were so horrid that Pharoah acknowledged the LORD for the first time and begged Moses to pray for relief. *Plead with the LORD*, he told Moses and Aaron, *to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD*.

Then Moses answered Pharoah in a way that would further God's supremacy, *"Be pleased to command me when I am to plead for you and for your servants and for your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile."* [10] And [Pharaoh] said, *"Tomorrow."* Moses said, *"Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God.* The essential message? "Pharoah, you tell me when you want it to take place, and I'll show You further that there is no God like the LORD by answering you at the very time you request." So, to show that God can't be presumed upon, Moses prayed that the frogs would cease and desist. And they did. A clear lesson to Pharoah and all the earth: God is holding all the creation cards.

Pharoah's temporary deference to God, however, was short-lived. In 8:15 we read, *But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.* God then sends a swarm of something else.

III. The Third Plague: "Gnats"

¹⁴ Genesis 1:21

¹⁵ Ryken, 228-229.

Verse 16, ***Then the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.’”*** In my outline, I have *gnats* in quotations for a reason. It's one of those catch-all words for small insects that seem to exist to annoy other living creatures. The term itself *gnat* doesn't really allow for the interpreter to have a dogmatic opinion on exactly which kind of small, bothersome insect to which Moses refers here. Yet there are some context clues that could lead us in a certain direction. For instance, some suggest that *mosquitos* are in view here. With the vast flood plains around the Nile River basin and on the heels of a deluge of blood, that's plausible. The double reference of Moses stating that the insects were ***on man and beast***, presumably to the insects' advantage, might lend itself to some kind of biting, winged nuisance. The reference to striking ***the dust of the earth***, however, might reasonably turn you the other direction. However, similar references in scripture to *dust* seem to be addressing the number of a thing instead of highlighting the kind of thing.¹⁶ Whatever insect one might have in mind, this reference to the ***dust*** becoming a source of torment for the Egyptians shows that God controls not only the waters that sustain life, but He is LORD over the lands that gain immediate benefit from such waters.

Again, the LORD is expressing His rule over the Egyptian gods, in this case it's *Geb*, god of the earth, who was the very personification of the ground itself. Within the Egyptian religious framework, he was believed to govern the soil, its fertility, and the creatures that sprang from it.¹⁷ Vegetation, crawling life, and even the dust beneath one's feet fell under his domain. Earthquakes were sometimes explained as the laughter of *Geb* rumbling through the land.¹⁸ This god was closely associated with things that creep, bite, and swarm along the earth's surface. In short, the land around the river was not neutral either. It was understood to be alive, sacred, and governed by the gods.

And it was indeed governed, but not by the god *Geb*. Again, creation is in reverse. Instead of good coming forth from the earth, billions of bugs begin to bug Pharoah and his people. And the magicians acknowledge the true governing power behind creation in reverse, verse 19, ***“This is the finger of God.”*** The tricksters admitted to being bested. This insect invasion had nothing to do with human power or wisdom or wit. Behind it was a supremacy that made the cosmos out of nothing, speaking all things into existence and upholding it by the word of His power.

After this point in Exodus, we only see the magicians once more, humiliated and incapacitated with boils.¹⁹ Here they acknowledge not just the LORD's existence, but His ability and strength. They break, and because we know the end of the story, and the end of the storyline of the Bible, we know that every power of darkness is simply on the clock. They will cave to the majestic power of the Living Christ.

But before Pharoah caves in his pompous pride to free the people of God for a life of worship, verse 19 expresses, ***“But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”*** Pharoah kept his rebel-streak of rejection going. Alec Motyer tells us what is

¹⁶ Genesis 13:16, “I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.” See also Numbers 23:10.

¹⁷ Ryken, 240.

¹⁸ Samuel Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts*, 268. (<https://ia903106.us.archive.org/27/items/pyramidtextsmercer/Pyramid%20Texts%20Mercer.pdf>)

¹⁹ Exodus 9:11

lurking if the head of the snake maintains his defenses, “If the plagues begin with the disasters sin brings, they lead [inevitably] to the death with which sin ends.”²⁰

Conclusion

These first three plagues struck at the heart of Egyptian life as its people were dependent on a body of water they saw as divine.²¹ If anything, God was announcing His greatness over the Nile. It is in His hand to grant and sustain life. The gods are nothing to Him. He is righteous in the exercise of His judgements, and He is so kind in the exercise of His grace to free His people from evil and its grip. Underneath every plague are two realities running concurrently: the displeasure of God towards an oppressive regime, represented by its obstinate, snake-crowned monarch and God’s steadfast love for His covenant people. With these plagues He is judging the one and in the process of rescuing the other. And both are unfolding here that the earth might know that He is God, and there is no other.

God has told us why we are living and breathing: To know this God, and to make this God known.

Let’s tell Him of our insufficiency and afresh place our trust in His Son, who absorbed the worst plague to ever befall any person or peoples. He bore the full wrath of God the Father so that the penalty for our sin might be satisfied.

He is the LORD, worthy to be known, and in knowing, loved.

²⁰ Motyer, 116.
²¹ Motyer, 117.