

YOM ADONAI AND THE NINTH PLAGUE

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In a previous paper on the Ninth Plague (the plague of darkness) [*JBQ* XXIX:1, January-March, 2001], it was my contention that this was the decisive blow which led to Israel's Exodus from Egypt. It was the persistent darkness, which terrified the Egyptians, that led to the dramatic events which ensued.

To recapitulate that paper briefly: Egypt's principal deity was the sun god Ra, the source of all light and life.¹ When the darkness continued pertinaciously, beyond all normal limits, the Egyptians began to panic (Ex. 12:30, 33). This could only mean that Ra was in dire trouble, and the demise of Ra would mean the end of all light. Without light, all life would soon wither away. In the face of this grave emergency, the Egyptians resorted to what pagans were wont to do in such circumstances: They slaughtered their firstborn.² When the darkness still failed to lift, they implored Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Israel's departure from Egypt was hasty (Deut. 16:3) and occurred because of and in the midst of darkness (16:1).

Once the darkness lifted, the Egyptians had a complete change of heart. It seemed to them that Ra was once more triumphant, and his foes were vanquished. Consequently, they did not hesitate to join Pharaoh in pursuing the Israelites in order to return them to bondage (14:6).

If we were to follow the traditional account that the massacre of the firstborn had been wrought by God, would the Egyptians have been so eager to re-enslave the Israelites? If indeed, God descended from on high, striking dead the firstborn, could He not come down again and deliver even more ferocious blows? Since the Egyptians had no such qualms, one can conclude that they and not God carried out the slaughter. What terrified them was the persistent darkness. Once that was gone, so was their fright.

The Exodus from Egypt became a defining moment in the history of the people of Israel. Time and again, the words *zecher l'yitsiyat mitzraim* [remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt] are invoked. Was there also any resonance of the cataclysmic occurrence, which precipitated this

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signal event? It might be instructive to turn to the prophets, who were closest in time to this epochal happening for any such reverberations.

YOM ADONAI [THE DAY OF THE LORD]

Not a single prophet makes mention of *makat bechorot* [slaying of the first-born], which according to tradition was executed by God. Even Nehemiah, who alone alludes to the theophany at Sinai (Neh. 9:13) and speaks of signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, fails to include *makat bechorot* as one of God's doings (9:10).

It is only in the Book of Psalms that mention of *makat bechorot* is made four times (Ps. 78:51, 85:8, 105:36, 136:10). Of these, Psalm 105, which lists the plagues, begins with the Ninth Plague: *He sent darkness and it was dark* (v. 25). The Soncino commentator³ observes:

The psalmist does not follow the Exodus account of the plagues. Why he begins with the ninth plague is uncertain. Ibn Ezra thinks it was because this plague broke the stubbornness of Pharaoh's ministers, and forced the king to consider releasing the Israelites.

But whilst *makat bechorot* goes unmentioned, many prophets speak ominously of the coming of *Yom Adonai* [Day of The Lord]. This was something that was expected to occur. From whence this expectation? Was there some antecedent justifying such expectation? What was the nature of such a day? Why was it regarded as so portentous a happening?

For Isaiah, this will be the nature of *Yom Adonai*:

Behold, the day of the Lord cometh. The stars in heaven and the constellations thereof, shall not give their light. The sun shall be darkened in his going forth. And the moon shall not cause the light to shine (Isa. 13:9).

Ezekiel describes the Day of the Lord in this fashion: *For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near, A day of clouds* (Ezek. 30:3). He continues: *At Tehaphnehes, also the day shall withdraw itself, when I shall break there the yoke of Egypt, And the pride of her power shall cease in her. As for her, a cloud shall cover her* (30:18). Twice in this chapter of Ezekiel's peroration on Egypt, the word *shefatim* [judgments] is used (30:14, 19). Then he prophesies:

And when I shall extinguish thee, I will cover the heaven. And make the stars thereof black. I will cover the sun with a cloud. And the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven, will I make black over thee and set darkness upon thy land (32:7).

How will the yoke of Egypt be broken, and the pride of her power cease in her? It will be done on the Day of the Lord, when the sun, moon and stars shall cease their shining and darkness shall envelop the land. Was there a time in the past when the yoke of Egypt was broken by darkness? Was there a time when *shifatim* were executed? *Shifatim* is the precise term found in the Book of Exodus with reference to the gods of Egypt.

In a similar vein, other prophets delineate *Yom Adonai* in identical descriptions. Joel proclaims: *For the day of the Lord cometh, for it is at hand, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick clouds (2:1-2).* And: *The sun and the moon are become black, and the stars withdraw their shining (v. 10).* In the next chapter: *And I shall show wonders in the heavens and on earth blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood. Before the great and terrible day of the Lord (3:3-4).* Then he adds: *For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision, the sun and the moon are become black. And the stars withhold their shining (4:14-15)..*

Amos admonishes his contemporaries: *Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord. Wherefore would ye have the day of the Lord. It is darkness and not light (5:15).* Then: *'And it shall come to pass on that day,' saith the Lord God, 'I shall cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth on a clear day' (v. 20).*

Similarly, Zephaniah states: *Hold thy peace in the presence of the Lord God; for the day of the Lord is at hand (Zech. 1:7).* Then:

The great day of the Lord is near. It is near and hasteth greatly. That day is a day of wrath. A day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess. A day of clouds and thick darkness (vv. 14-15).

Particularly instructive is Isaiah, in his vivid and graphic depiction of *Yom Adonai*. In trenchant and searing terms, he declaims:

Howl ye, for the day of the Lord is at hand. As destruction from the Almighty shall it come. Therefore, shall all hands be slack, and every heart

of man shall melt, and they shall be affrighted. Pangs and throes, shall take hold of them. They shall be in pain as a woman in travail. They shall look aghast at one another, their faces shall be faces of flame. Behold the day of the Lord cometh. Cruel and full of wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof, shall not give their light. And the moon shall not cause her light to shine (Isa. 13:6-10).

Then he adds: *And I shall visit upon the world their evil, and upon the wicked their iniquity. And I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease. And I will lay low the haughtiness of tyrants (v. 11).*

Here we have a daunting portrait of *Yom Adonai*. It will be a day of awesome judgment, a day of reckoning – a day of punishing the wicked for their wickedness. The line in Isaiah, *They shall look aghast one at another (13:8)* echoes the verse in Exodus, *They saw not one another (10:23)*. It will be a day when the inhabitants will all be affrighted.

How will this be done? How will God chastise the arrogant for their evil? How will He cause all hands to be slack and every heart melt? How will He make all to cringe in fear and terror? Will it be done by God descending from on high and personally smiting the evildoers? Not at all. It will come about when the sun will darken in its going forth, and the moon, the stars and all their constellations will cease to shine.

It is in the phenomenon of total darkness that pangs and throes shall take hold of them to make the earth a desolation. This will be, according to Ezekiel, the day of *shefatim*. This will be, in the words of Zephaniah, a day of wrath, of wasteness, of trouble and distress. The day of the Lord will turn into a nightmarish night of the Lord.

In other words, the day (or night) of the Lord itself shall be the punishment to be meted out. How will the wicked be made to pay for their wickedness? How will the arrogancy of the proud cease, and the haughtiness of tyrants be laid low? It will occur when the sun will go down at noon, and the earth becoming dark on a clear day. Or, as Joel puts it, the sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood. The most terrifying of all punishments, according to the prophet, will be the devastating effects of total darkness.

From whence this conception of a day of the Lord? From whence this expectation? Was it all a concoction of the prophetic imagination? Was this something invented by them? Or was it based on a similar occurrence in the past?

When Ezekiel pronounces darkness as a dire punishment for Egypt and uses the word *shfatim* in conjunction with it, was he not drawing on a cataclysmic event in the past? When he speaks of darkness breaking the yoke of Egypt, did this not happen before? Was there not a time when all were quaking and quivering because of ghostly darkness?

No less than nine prophets predict the imminent coming of the day of the Lord. (Besides those cited above, there is also Obadiah 1:15, Micah 3:6, Zechariah 14:6, and Malachi 3:23.) It is hardly likely that it was just a figment of their fantasies. They expected it to come just as it came before. It was the Ninth Plague that laid low the haughtiness of Pharaoh; so will the day (or night) of the Lord humble all the arrogant and proud. God is not pictured as descending from on high to inflict punishments on evildoers. He can do once again what He did before; that is, to plunge the world into total darkness. There is nothing to match this. *Yom Adonai* was to be a second manifestation of the Ninth Plague.

NOTES

1. See, A. P. Thomas, *Egyptian Gods and Myths* (London: Luzac & Co., 1949) p. 36; E. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969) pp. 322, 335, 337, 348; H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948) pp. 17-18; S. Mercer, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* (London: Luzac, 1949) pp. 125, 127; L. Spence, *Myths and Legends of Ancient Egypt* (London: G.G. Harper, 1915) p. 131.
2. Compare the action of the King of Moab, who sacrificed his own son (II Kg. 3:26-28).
3. A. Cohen, *Soncino Commentary on Psalms* (London: Soncino Press, 1950) p. 348 No. 28.

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