

THE NINTH PLAGUE

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WHO SLAUGHTERED THE FIRST-BORN OF EGYPT?

Who slaughtered the first-born of Egypt? Is there any question? Why, God, of course! Is it not stated quite clearly and indisputably that it was God's doing? To cite but two verses in the Book of Exodus:¹

And it came to pass at midnight, that the Lord smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on the throne unto the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the first-born cattle (12:29).

And it came to pass when Pharaoh hardened to let us go, that the Lord slew all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man and the first-born of beast (13:15).

The Passover Hagadah is even more emphatic:

And the Lord brought us forth from Egypt, not by a ministering angel, nor by a messenger, but by Himself in His glory did the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: 'And I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night and I will smite all the first-born in the land of Egypt from man to beast and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments, I am the Lord.'

From these sources and others, it would seem clear that God Himself slew the first-born of Egypt. Since the other plagues failed to move Pharaoh to permit the Israelites to leave, the Tenth Plague, slaying of the first-born, was the coup de grace that forced his hand. Drastic and dramatic action was needed, for nothing else worked. The Tenth Plague was the decisive blow that led to Israel's Exodus from Egypt. So goes the standard view.

There are, however, some troubling questions with this account. Was there no other recourse for an omnipotent Supreme Being to move tyrants except by killing innocent creatures, as were virtually all the first-born? Is it befitting for the Creator of the universe to mimic pagan deities for whom the sacrifice of first-born was not an uncommon practice? To be sure, in this in-

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stance it was done as a punishment. But why kill the first-born for the sins of Pharaoh?

In addition to this theological and moral problem, there is a telling difficulty in the narrative itself:

And Pharaoh rose in the night he and his servants and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead. And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, 'We are all dead men' (12:30-31).

The presence of the Israelites now represented a mortal threat to all Egyptians, who were fearfully convinced that they would all die if the Israelites remained among them any longer. Consequently, extreme pressure was exerted to have the Israelites leave. Yet no sooner did they depart, then a complete change of heart occurred:

And the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned towards the people, and they said 'What is this, we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us'. And he made ready his chariots and took the people with him (14:5-6).

One wonders what happened to the mortal fright the Egyptians just felt, when they importuned to have the Israelites leave forthwith. One might have expected, *au contraire*, a collective sigh of relief, exclaiming, in effect, "good riddance." For according to the traditional account, death had just been visited upon every Egyptian home. Their own lives were perceived to be in jeopardy. Yet they readily set out to recapture and re-enslave the very same people whose God had just purportedly inflicted such deadly blows, and who doubtless was capable of even more devastating strikes if aroused again.

According to the text, Pharaoh set out with his minions to bring the Israelites back into bondage *and he took the people with him* -- the people who had just been panic-stricken joined with seeming alacrity. These were the people of whom it is stated: *The Egyptians were burying them that the Lord had smitten among them* (Num. 33:4). Were they no longer afraid of a God with such awesome power? How was it that the terror they had just experienced evaporated so quickly?

While the Egyptians (prior to their change of heart) were pressing for the Israelites to leave, the Israelites themselves were enjoined to leave in haste

[וַיֵּלֶךְ]:. *And thus shall you eat it with your loins girded* (Ex. 12:11) -- their shoes on their feet, their staffs in their hands; according to Rashi, in preparation for their journey. *And you shall eat them in haste. And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders* (Ex. 12:34). As recalled in Deuteronomy, *For in haste didst thou come forth out of Egypt* (Deut. 16:3).

There was no time to wait for the dough to leaven. They were to eat in haste. They could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any victuals or make preparations for a long journey ahead of them. Not a moment was to be lost. The inference is that if they tarried, even momentarily, all would be forfeited. Their opportunity to be free would be gone forever.

Why were the Israelites in such a hurry? After all, they now had the upper hand. Their God had purportedly just unleashed crippling blows upon their enslavers. The Egyptians were terrified of them, not the other way around, and were pressing to have them leave. Was not the slaughter of the first-born ample proof the Israelites were not a people with whom to trifle? If they had taken a little longer to be better prepared, would the Egyptians have dared refuse to let them leave? Was it really necessary that their departure be executed in such haste?

Then there is this puzzling matter: *And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments* (12:12). What judgments were executed against the gods of Egypt? If judgments [פְּסָלִים] are taken to mean punishments, humiliation, diminution of power, when and how were they carried out? The text does not specify. The principal Egyptian deity was the solar god, Ra. What judgments were wrought against him?

To return to the original question: Who slaughtered the first-born of Egypt? Was it God? Did He descend from on high to smite each first-born? Was this the reason the Egyptians became panicky and cried out, *'We will all surely die.'* If so, then how was it that no sooner did they bury their dead (purportedly smitten by God), they readily joined Pharaoh to have the Israelites brought back and re-enslaved? Did they no longer fear that such a God could and would strike again?

If, on the other hand, if it was not God's doing, what was it that so terrified them into urging Pharaoh to have the Israelites leave? Was the source of their terror something other than the traditional version? If so, how were the first-

born slain and by whom? Could these events have been precipitated by the Ninth Plague, which, according to the text, preceded the Tenth? A closer look at the Ninth Plague and its ramifications is in order.

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The Ninth Plague is described as follows:

And the Lord said unto Moses: 'Stretch out thy hand toward heaven that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt.' And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days; they saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days; but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings (10:21-23).

The darkness of the Ninth Plague was not of an ordinary variety. It was thick darkness. It was so thick that it could be felt; so intense that there was something solid or substantial in it. One commentator notes that the word "feel" [אָפֶּן] is the *hiphil* of אָפֶּן ["depart"]. That is, the usual darkness of night would depart, replaced by an extraordinary darkness that the Egyptians could not overcome, even with the help of artificial lighting.

According to Rashi, the darkness lasted not three days but two triads of days, and was of different degrees of intensity. Louis Ginzberg, in his monumental *Legends of the Jews*, states that it lasted seven days.² According to Josephus, the darkness blinded the vision of the Egyptians and choked their breath.³ The Wisdom of Solomon states that the darkness paralyzed them with terror.⁴ There is a rabbinic tradition, in contradiction of the scriptural narrative, that the vast majority of the Israelites perished in the darkness, and only a small fraction was spared to leave Egypt.⁵

In non-Jewish sources, there is the phrase in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh that "all that was bright turned into darkness."⁶ A shrine of black granite found at El Arish reads: "The land was in great affliction. Neither men nor gods could see the faces of those beside them."⁷ According to Greek writers, even an eclipse is a time when sore fear comes upon men.⁸

Thus it is that darkness, even for a day or less, creates havoc while it lasts. The Ninth Plague, whether it lasted nine or seven or six or three days, was terrifying and paralyzing, with devastating impact. For the Egyptians it was

especially ghastly, because their principal deity was the sun god Ra, who was to them the source of all light and life.

Ra was regarded as the maker of everything in the visible world around them, as well as heaven itself. As day and night alternated daily, the Egyptians regarded the darkness as a powerful opponent of the sun, an implacable foe of the light. The day was considered good, the night evil. The struggle between light and darkness continued, by day and by night. The fiends of darkness attacked the sun during the darkest hours of the night, and exerted all their powers to prevent the sun from rising in the sky at dawn. But Ra, with his magical powers, was able to defeat his enemies, dissipating darkness which was replaced by light.⁹

What were the Egyptians to make of a darkness that persisted long after it is ordinarily replaced by light? It could only mean that Ra was in trouble – unable to overcome the fiends of darkness. If Ra was in deadly danger, then so were they. Without Ra, there would be no more light, and eventually all life would wither away.¹⁰ In such perilous circumstances, what was there to be done? How could Ra be saved and hence themselves? How did pagans react in ancient times when faced with a grave predicament? In II Kings, there is a passage that is most instructive:

When the king of Moab saw that the battle was too sore for him, he took his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall (3:26-27).

Confronted with an impending catastrophe, as a last resort, the king of Moab sacrificed his first-born, in the hope of escaping disaster. How could such a sacrifice save him from a looming calamity? It was probably based on the premise that the anger of the gods, once incurred, imperiled the well-being of an entire people. By offering choice lives (i.e., the first-born), the gods would relent and the rest would be spared.

Did something similar occur in Egypt? Were the first-born sacrificed by the Egyptians themselves in the wake of a terrifying crisis of the highest magnitude? They could not, in this case, be imploring salvation by the power of Ra, for he was at the time apparently too weak to save even himself. An alternative hope might have been that the failing deity might be reinvigorated by the life-force and lifeblood of the sacrifices. Their hope, then, would be to save Ra and thereby themselves. When the darkness failed to lift, even after the

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sacrifice of the first-born, they implored Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave; otherwise *'We will all surely die.'*

That the darkness was the source of their terror is in evidence in the text. As noted by Cassuto:

This plague [darkness] will show how great is the power of God against the gods of Egypt. When the God of Israel wishes, the sun disappears, which was the Egyptians' principal god, and can no longer shine upon those that worship him.

If the supposition is correct, that the word *raah* (Ex. 10:10) alludes to the sun god Ra, then one can conclude that the plague of darkness is an immediate response to Pharaoh's words 'see that Ra is before you.'¹¹

Cassuto likewise notes that, in the dramatic passage dealing with Israel's Exodus from Egypt, the word "night" appears in three consecutive verses:

It came to pass at midnight (12:29).

And Pharaoh rose in the night (12:30).

And he called for Moses and Aaron by night (12:31).

Then, *It was a night of watching unto the Lord (12:42).* This same night is a night of watching for the children of Israel throughout their generations: *For in the month of Abib, the Lord thy God brought thee forth out of Egypt by night (Deut. 16:1).*

It would appear that all this transpired at night, in the midst of darkness. As the Egyptians perceived it, a cosmic battle was occurring. Their principal deity, Ra, was in mortal combat with the God of Israel and losing ground. The ramifications of such a struggle boggled the mind. All light and life was in danger of being extinguished. What other recourse was there but do as the king of Moab did in his day, sacrifice the first-born. Scholars relate that the Egyptians rarely engaged in human sacrifice, but could this not be one of those rare occasions? When their actions failed to dissipate the darkness, there was the outcry *'We will all surely die unless the Israelites leave.'*

Moses, reared in the royal court, was doubtless familiar with the worship of Ra. His strategy was to have the Israelites leave in haste, for once darkness gave way to sunlight, their opportunity to go free would be lost forever. In the minds of the Egyptians, the appearance of the sun would be regarded as a triumph for Ra. The God of Israel, who was deemed responsible for the darkness, would then have been vanquished.

Consequently, there was no time to dawdle, no time to wait for the dough to rise, no time to prepare adequate provisions for their long-lasting journey. To delay even momentarily meant running the risk of losing their chance for freedom. It was a matter of making haste before the sun shines.

In this context, it is understandable that the paroxysms of fear that had gripped the Egyptians during the Ninth Plague were now dissolved. It also accounts for the complete change of heart by the Egyptians. The cause of their alarm was not God descending from on high and slaughtering their first born. What frightened them was the darkness. Once the darkness was gone, so was their fear. Ra had overcome the forces arrayed against him. Why should they not, therefore, bring the Israelites back into bondage? Why lose the free labor provided by slaves? Pharaoh had no problem mustering popular support for this, and took the people with him.

Israel's hurried departure took place in the midst of and because of the darkness, the decisive blow that culminated in the Exodus. But does not this contradict the verses which state unequivocally that the killing of the first-born was God's doing? Not entirely, for in early biblical times all happenings, whether intentional or accidental, were ascribed to God.

When someone smote another accidentally, God caused it to *come to hand* (21:13). Likewise, *The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh* (10:20). If this verse were to be taken literally, then it was God and not Pharaoh who was responsible for the continued subjugation of the Israelites.

Rashi, quoting the sages, states on numerous occasions that the Torah speaks in the style of people. Thus, as Cassuto states, *And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh*, is another way of saying "And Pharaoh's heart hardened." It was Pharaoh's obduracy and not God's doing that kept the Israelites in servitude. All happenings were attributed to God, regardless of how they came about. Similarly, if the Egyptian first-born were slain, the slaughter was ascribed to God.¹²

Does this mean there were only Nine Plagues, when tradition insists that there were Ten? Not at all. The slaying of the first-born was indeed a Plague.

'And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, thus saith the Lord. Israel is my son. My first-born. And I have said unto thee: Let my son go, that he may serve Me, and thou hast refused to let him go. Behold I will slay thy son, thy first-born' (4:22-23).

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According to Cassuto, this passage is to be understood in the context of measure for measure. Just as Pharaoh refused to release Israel, God's first-born, so will Pharaoh's first-born be slain. The slaying of the first-born was preordained by God. But it was executed by the Egyptians, following the plague of darkness.

In the Haggadah, there is the chant "Of old, most miracles were performed at night". Thus, one of history's greatest dramas occurred at night; that is, in the midst of darkness. It was done in haste before darkness gave way to sunlight. The Exodus from Egypt was a defining moment in the history of the people of Israel. Time and again, the words in memory of the Exodus from Egypt [וַיִּצְרַח לְיִצְחָק] are intoned. Is there any echo in later times of the darkness, the precipitous event that led to it? This will be the subject of a forthcoming paper in this journal.¹³

NOTES

1. Soncino Chumash (Jewish Publication Society)
2. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Phila.:Jewish Publication Society, 1909) p. 339.
3. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. St. J. Thackeray (1930) Book II:X:14, 5.
4. *Wisdom of Solomon*, trans. E.J. Goodspeed (1959) XVII:5:11:21.
5. Mechilta d'Rabbi Simon ben Jokhai, Exodus 10:23, 1905, p. 38.
6. The Epic of Gilgamesh, trans. R. C. Thompson (1928).
7. F. L. Griffith, "The Antiquities of Tel-el Yahudiyeh and Miscellaneous Work in Lower Egypt in 1887-88" (1890).
 8. See Pentateuch and Haftarahs, edited by H. Hertz, p. 251, n. 23. Herodotus tells us that the total eclipse of the sun in 585 BCE, during a battle between the Egyptians and the Medes, so terrified the combatants that they ceased fighting and concluded peace.
 9. 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; L. Spence, *Myths and Legends of Ancient Egypt* (London: Ballantyne Press, 1915) p. 131.
 10. E. Wallis Budge, *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934) pp. 140, 141.
 11. U. Cassuto, *Perush al Sefer Shmot* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1954) pp. 85, 88.
 12. *Ibid.* p. 37
 13. *JBQ*, in press, 2001