

Study Notes: Exodus 8:20-32
September 6, 2026: “Flies!”
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Then the LORD said to Moses, “Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh as he goes to the river and say to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you do not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you and your officials, on your people and into your houses. The houses of the Egyptians will be full of flies; even the ground will be covered with them.

- The story of the plagues in Exodus can be divided into three sets of three plagues, with the tenth plague standing apart as unique in the way it is narrated. With this framework, the telling of the first, fourth, and seventh plagues has several similarities.
- Like the first plague, YHWH told Moses to meet Pharaoh at the river. Moses was to tell Pharaoh to let the people go so that they could worship YHWH. If Pharaoh did not let the people go, YHWH would send swarms of flies that would be on the people, in their houses, and even cover the ground.
- The New American Commentary explains how Pharaoh would have felt seeing Moses at the Nile again, “It cannot have been lost on Pharaoh, when he saw Moses waiting for him on the bank of the Nile in fulfillment of this command from God, that he was once again in the place and situation where the plagues had started. The cycle of encounter locations and patterns is presumably intended to have this effect on Pharaoh: to cause him as the pattern begins to repeat itself to think, in effect, ‘Oh, no! Not again!’”
- Much like the other plagues, this plague also has a connection to the gods of Egypt, this time being a direct affront to Uatchit, the fly god.

“But on that day I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live; no swarms of flies will be there, so that you will know that I, the LORD, am in this land. I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This sign will occur tomorrow.”

- Unlike the previous plagues, YHWH makes a distinction between the land of Goshen where the Israelites lived and the rest of Egypt. The flies would not impact the Israelites, only the Egyptians. This distinction was a sign that YHWH was present and protecting His people.
 - The New American Commentary explains, how this further proves YHWH is who He says He is, “Here, then, is brought overtly to the reader’s attention the fact that the plagues, far from being natural phenomena naturally produced, were nature turned on its head: nature ordered by its Creator to act in abnormal ways that were ominously frightening for the Egyptians, wonderfully reassuring for the Israelites, and clearly evidential (in this plague, even to Pharaoh) of a divine mighty act in service of a divine demand.”
- Pharaoh was given a very short time to decide and prepare for this plague. Moses told Pharaoh that the sign would occur the next day.

And the LORD did this. Dense swarms of flies poured into Pharaoh's palace and into the houses of his officials; throughout Egypt the land was ruined by the flies.

- YHWH did what He promised to do. The next day, the land of Egypt was overrun and ruined by flies. The New American Commentary explains the ruin that the land experienced, "The ruin here described was not topological but rather referred to the quality of life. People couldn't eat without ingesting flies; they couldn't sleep without flies covering their bodies; they couldn't work for having to swat flies and/or because they couldn't see well through the swarms; their skin was welts with fly bites."

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land."

- When Pharaoh saw this, he called Moses and Aaron and presented them with a compromise. They could offer sacrifices to YHWH, but they must do it in the land of Egypt.
- The New American Commentary explains Pharaoh's concession, "These concessions, however brief and partial, represent the first cracks in the stone of the official Egyptian government resistance, demonstrating that the plagues were beginning to affect the king's resolve. Moses' account does not differentiate between the two most likely causes for Pharaoh's wavering, the growing intensity of the plagues and their overall cumulative effect. Presumably, both causes worked to influence Pharaoh's decision toward compromise. As plagues kept coming, as their severity kept increasing, and as it became ever more obvious that they were not mere tricks but real, divinely instigated acts of judgment against Egypt, the king began searching for ways to end them without ending Egyptian domination over Israel."

But Moses said, "That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the LORD our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us? We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God, as he commands us." Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the LORD your God in the wilderness, but you must not go very far. Now pray for me."

- Moses responded by telling Pharaoh they must leave the land of Egypt, because the sacrifices that they would make as part of worship would be detestable to the Egyptians, and cause them to rise up against the Israelites. Moses repeated that they must take a three day journey into the wilderness to worship and offer sacrifices.
 - The Faithlife Study Bible helps explain Moses' objection to Pharaoh that the sacrifices would be detestable to the Egyptians, "The Hebrew word used here [translated as detestable], *to'evah* (meaning "abomination"), is also used in Gen 43:32 and 46:34 to describe the Egyptians' revulsion at dining with Hebrews, as well as their distaste for shepherds. The nature of the Egyptians' revulsion towards the Israelites' sacrifice is unknown. Egyptian literature and art demonstrate that the Egyptians did not object to the sacrifice of cattle. Pharaoh does not argue with Moses' concern, suggesting that he knows it to be true."
 - The phrase "three-day journey" carries the idea of "far from here" and represents a complete departure from Egypt.

- Pharaoh agreed, but added a stipulation that they must not go very far. He still wanted to hold control over the people. Pharaoh also asked Moses to pray for him. Given how Moses responded, it is clear that Pharaoh wanted relief from the flies.
 - The New American Commentary explains, Pharaoh's words, "now pray for me," "in v. 28 [it] suggest[s] that this plague had touched him personally to an extent that the prior three had not. Moses' promise to pray immediately after departing the palace ('as soon as I leave you,' v. 29) may be another indication of the way people were being 'driven crazy' by the swarms of flies: it was the sort of thing one might say if during the encounter with Pharaoh there had been many expressions of desire for relief from what had become intolerable."

Moses answered, "As soon as I leave you, I will pray to the LORD, and tomorrow the flies will leave Pharaoh and his officials and his people. Only let Pharaoh be sure that he does not act deceitfully again by not letting the people go to offer sacrifices to the LORD."

- Moses agreed to pray for Pharaoh as soon as he left. Moses once again confidently asserted that YHWH would hear his prayer and remove the flies the next day.
- Moses warned Pharaoh not to be deceitful and change his mind about letting the people go. Moses likely added this given Pharaoh's refusal to keep his word after YHWH killed the frogs.

Then Moses left Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD, and the LORD did what Moses asked. The flies left Pharaoh and his officials and his people; not a fly remained. But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

- Moses prayed, and YHWH heard Moses's prayer. Moses kept his word to Pharaoh, and YHWH removed every fly. The Expositor's Bible Commentary notes, "The plague is removed through Moses' prayer (cf. Elijah, 1 Ki 18:42; Amos, Am 7:2, 5). So effective is the power of prayer and the evidence that God is in their midst that 'not a fly remained.'"
- However, Pharaoh did not keep his word. He once again hardened his heart and would not let the people go.