

Martin White. 18th January 2009. Exodus 1-11

The Plagues in Egypt

Last week I started a series looking at the Israelites in the desert – the time between when they left Egypt and when they arrived in the Land that God was giving to them.

And the reason we are looking at this series is that there are some similarities between this time in the life of Israel, and where we are at as a church at the moment; we have had some really good times in the past, but I believe that God is calling us on to a new place... but we're not there yet!

And I believe that as we look at some of the lessons God's People learned on the way to the Promised Land, so God will challenge and encourage us and will speak prophetically to us.

So last week we started a bit further back, looking at how the Israelites got into Egypt in the first place – which was actually through God causing a lot of bad things to work towards His bigger purpose in preserving His people through Joseph, and through God providing food enough to feed the world through a time of famine.

Today I want to be almost as ambitious and tell the story of the first 11 chapters of Exodus. The reason we're rushing through this isn't that there's not lots more to say about these chapters, but, as I said, the story that we are aiming to focus on is the part after they have left Egypt.

But in order to get to that part we are going to look today at how the Israelites left Egypt.

Remember last week that although Joseph had arrived in Egypt very badly – sold as a slave, he had risen up to be the Vizier – the second-in-command of the whole country.

And for the other 70 years that Joseph lived with his family in Egypt, things had gone well. But gradually, over the following 280 years attitudes towards the Israelites had changed; several generations of Pharaohs had come and gone; and the Israelites – although they had hugely increased in numbers, had become despised slaves.

There are a few clues as to why this happened- as well as racism.

Exodus 1:8-10 says:

Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." (Exodus 1:8-10 NIV)

This king- people think was possibly Pharaoh Tuthmosis III brutally oppressed the Israelites because of fear of their large numbers.

But also, there was possibly disdain for them because of what they did – they were shepherds.

Egypt at the time was the world's superpower and was technologically ahead of everyone else – especially in agriculture. They had amazing irrigation systems and grew crops along the flood plain of the Nile.

And because of this superiority, they looked down on everyone else as being 'backwards'.

There is a clue to this in the story of Joseph:

When Pharaoh calls you in and asks, 'What is your occupation?' you should answer, 'Your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did.' Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians." (Genesis 46:33-34 NIV)

So the Israelites were forced to be slaves- making bricks for all the amazing building projects and new cities that were being made.

There is an inscription on a wall in Egypt which has survived which shows slaves making bricks and has the helpful words over it – “Work without fainting.”



http://search.msn.co.uk/images/results.aspx?q=ancient+egyptian+slaves+brick&go=&form=QBIR#focal=e33d1be88863de287f3728aa855a4acc&furl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.faithhelper.com%2Fasiantic_slave.jpg

One more piece of background about the world that Moses was born into is that the Egyptians – as well as most peoples of the time, believed in local gods. They had different gods for different regions and purposes – and because of its importance for their life and agriculture, they had gods associated with the Nile, some of who looked like creatures around the Nile – crocodiles, frogs, birds, snakes etc.

So just after Moses was born, the Pharaoh had the idea of fixing 2 problems at once, reducing the numbers of the Israelites and making an offering to his gods by passing a law that said that all Israelite babies had to be thrown into the river Nile and drowned.

Moses’ mother was devastated, so made a basket out of reeds and put the baby in it, then placed it into the river and his sister watched from a distance to see what would happen next.

Then, similar to last week, God provided and Pharaoh’s daughter – a princess heard Moses’ crying, got him pulled out the river and decided to adopt him.

Moses’ sister jumped forward and said she knew of a slave who could be Moses’ nurse, then got Moses’ own mother to care for him as he grew up in the royal palace.

So Moses grew up with both the culture of Egypt and the identity of being an Israelite.

When he was about 40, he saw an Egyptian guard beating an Israelite slave, so seeing the injustice; he killed the guard and hid the body.

Soon afterwards an Israelite made a comment – not thanking him, but accusing him for what he had done.

In a panic he ran away and for 40 years became a shepherd in the wilderness – learning his own ‘desert’ lessons and having God deal with him.

At the end of this time God appeared to him in a burning bush and called him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let God’s People go.

Although he was nervous and tried to excuse himself out of this, he went to Pharaoh with his brother Aaron and told him to let God’s People go:

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.' "

Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go." (Exodus 4:1-2 NIV)

So they went back and perform signs God had told them to do:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle,' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become a snake."

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said. (Exodus 7:8-13 NIV)

Pharaoh's heart was hardened though – “Who is this God...?” Possibly he recognised God as just another local or tribal god, so he refused and kept his confidence in his own Egyptian gods.

So God brought 10 plagues on the nation of Egypt.

- Nile turning to blood
- Frogs
- Gnats
- Flies
- Cattle
- Boils
- Hail
- Locusts
- Darkness
- Death of the firstborn.

There are a number of ways to look at these events: God may have simply brought 10 separate plagues on Egypt, but probably they were linked and carried a deliberate meaning.

So, as they say; here's the “science bit!”

At the time there were active volcanoes in Ethiopia – upstream on the Nile - which were erupting periodically through that period of history.

A volcanic eruption could have caused a rise in the acidity levels in the river, allowing a type of poisonous, red algae which causes a phenomenon called a “red tide”, turning the river **blood** red.



This would be poisonous, killing the fish – the natural predators of **frogs**, and would force the frogs out of the river.

The dead fish would provide a food source for **gnats** and mosquitoes and then species of **flies** which would carry diseases like anthrax, which affect **cattle**, but not other livestock.

These could then spread, through bites from flies and through airborne spores to humans – causing illness and **boils**.

The next 3 are separate, naturally occurring disasters in that part of the world.

Hail is a huge problem that can devastate crops and harvests, as are **locusts**. So if the two came together, it would be utter ruin for a harvest.

And then, in desert regions, there are occasionally huge dust storms that almost blot out the sun (**darkness**).

Next week Jon will be speaking about the tenth plague.

Another part of these plagues is that they were a challenge to the Egyptian's pride and reliance on their agricultural skills; and a direct challenge to their religion – many of these things are directed at the Egyptian gods.

They worshipped the Nile as a bringer of life; fly-gods, frog-gods, cow and bull-gods and the sun-god. All of these things utterly removed the Egyptian's security.

And whether these were separate acts of God, or God causing natural phenomena to come together in a short period, still He sovereignly shook Pharaoh and Egypt in order to bring His People out of slavery.

Last week with Joseph, and in the account of Moses' birth, there have been story after story of God's Provision – turning circumstances round for His bigger plans.

But looking at Moses with Pharaoh, there's another thing I think we need to notice, because it's something that's very relevant to us at the moment.

A pastor I know was saying last year saying that he had been really struggling to understand the passage in James which says:

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (James 5:17-18 NIV)

His problem was why God would allow a 3½ year famine to come on the nation of Israel – bringing financial disaster.

Then, as he remembered the story of Elijah - who stood against the prophets of Baal, he was reminded that Baal was a rain god – so the true God sent His prophet – Elijah to show who was really Lord of the rain – who could call down lightning on Mount Carmel to consume His sacrifice.

And the hardship of the drought was necessary to shake people out of their false security – worshipping the wrong god.

He went on to say that he believed that at the moment God was shaking our nation out of its false security and worship of money.

I heard a similar prophetic word brought by Ginny Burgin, who is a respected prophetic woman from Sheffield in October, 2007:

Ginny Burgin

I just feel God saying, in yet a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth, and that which cannot be shaken, will remain. I have not spoken these things to you because you do not hear, I have spoken these things to you to underline my promises to you at this time. I've spoken these things to you that you may write them on the depths of your heart. I've spoken these things to you so that you may know, that that which cannot be shaken, will be that which remain. For a shaking is coming in this nation says the Lord, for it is time for this nation to seek the Lord. And I tell you that that which has been unprecedented is the beginning of many unprecedented things which will happen in this nation. For I tell you, great challenges will come, challenges that challenge every part of where a man puts his security. For even as shoppers go out in their materialism they will be faced with eternity.

(Ginny Burgin, October, 2007)

As a nation, we are in a time of shaking at the moment – God is shaking us out of a love of money and security in material things.

I bank with Barclays, and even it – one of the biggest UK banks, lost 1/5 of its value in an hour this week. Things like banks and jobs and houses and pensions, that a year ago, people thought of as completely safe, aren't feeling as secure any more.

So what's going on?

God is shaking things in order to get people's security in the only thing that is totally unshakeable – Him.

To Him that's more important than our comfort and financial security.

I believe that what has happened over the last year with the 'credit crunch', although it is hard, is God's Grace towards our nation.

And we need to know that God's shaking happens in churches and individuals too.

But we have something unshakable – and I believe God's prophetic call for us at the moment is to hold onto Him.

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

**Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.
(Hebrews 12:26-28 NIV)**