said.

[14]And the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. [15]Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake. [16]And say to him, 'The

דִּבֶּר יְהוָה׃ פ

14 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כָּבֵד לֵב פַּרְעֹה
מֵאֵן לְשַׁלַּח הָעָם׃ 15 לֵךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה בַּבֹּקֶר הִנֵּה
יֹצֵא הַמָּיְמָה וְנִצַּבְתָּ לִקְרָאתוֹ עַל־שְׂפַת הַיְאֹר
וְהַמַּטֶּה אֲשֶׁר־נֶהְפַּךְ לְנָחָשׁ תִּקַּח בְּיָדֶךָ׃

## *The Plagues*[16] (7:14–11:10)

Pharaoh's intransigence—as foretold—sets off the "extraordinary chastisements" mentioned in verse 4. These take the form of ten disasters that strike Egypt in the course of a year.[17] They are popularly known as the "Ten Plagues," in Hebrew *'eser makkot*.

The Hebrew Bible features three accounts of the plagues. The longest and most detailed narrative is the prose version set forth in the ensuing chapters. Psalms 78:43–51 and 105:27–36 present highly condensed poetic paraphrases. The three sources vary in the sequence, number, and content of the plagues. Psalm 78 makes no mention of lice, boils, and darkness, whereas Psalm 105 ignores boils and pestilence. Due to the uncertain meaning of some of the Hebrew terms in those psalms, it is difficult to determine exactly how many and what kind of plagues the two compositions respectively present. Nor can one establish with certainty whether the differences represent variant traditions or poetic license.

The present narrative is a sophisticated and symmetric literary structure[18] with a pattern of three groups each comprising three plagues. The climactic tenth plague possesses a character all its own. The first two afflictions in each triad are forewarned; the last always strikes suddenly, unannounced. Furthermore, in the case of the first, fourth, and seventh plagues Pharaoh is informed in the morning and Moses is told to "station" himself before the king, whereas in the second of each series Moses is told to "come in before Pharaoh," that is, to confront him in the palace. Finally, in the first triad of plagues it is always Aaron who is the effective agent; in the third, it is always Moses.[19]

The controlling purpose behind this literary architecture is to emphasize the idea that the nine plagues are not random vicissitudes of nature; although they are natural disasters, they are the deliberate and purposeful acts of divine will—their intent being retributive, coercive, and educative. As God's judgments on Egypt for the enslavement of the Israelites, they are meant to crush Pharaoh's resistance to their liberation. They are to demonstrate to Egypt the impotence of its gods[20] and, by contrast, the incomparability of YHVH, God of Israel, as the one supreme sovereign God of Creation, who uses the phenomena of the natural order for His own purposes.[21]

In addition to this dominant motif of the plagues narrative, a secondary theme is also discernible: Israel as well as the Egyptians must "know" YHVH. This is made explicit in 10:2. The early Exodus narratives are very clear about the lack of the people's faith in its relationship with God.[22] In this regard, the mysterious silence of the Israelites throughout the course of the plagues may well be significant. True, the people is said to be shielded from the effects of the catastrophes, but only in the course of five of them;[23] nothing is said about this in connection with the others.[24] It is only after the culminating miracle at the sea that "the people feared the LORD; they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses" (14:31).

### THE FIRST PLAGUE: THE WATERS BECOME BLOODY (*dam*) (7:14–25)[25]

This plague has been explained as the extreme intensification of a well-known phenomenon that occurs periodically in the Nile valley. The river is fed by melting snow and summer rains that pour down from the highlands of Ethiopia and carry with them sediment from the tropical red earth that

LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, "Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness." But you have paid no heed until now. 17Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD." See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood; 18and the fish in the Nile will die. The Nile will stink so that the Egyptians will find it impossible to drink the water of the Nile.'"

19And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt—its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water—that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in [vessels of] wood and stone."

16 וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים שְׁלָחַנִי
אֵלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר שַׁלַּח אֶת־עַמִּי וְיַעַבְדֻנִי
בַּמִּדְבָּר וְהִנֵּה לֹא־שָׁמַעְתָּ עַד־כֹּה: 17 כֹּה אָמַר
יְהוָה בְּזֹאת תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי
מַכֶּה | בַּמַּטֶּה אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדִי עַל־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיְאֹר
וְנֶהְפְּכוּ לְדָם: 18 וְהַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר־בַּיְאֹר תָּמוּת וּבָאַשׁ
הַיְאֹר וְנָלְאוּ מִצְרַיִם לִשְׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִן־הַיְאֹר:
ס

19 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֱמֹר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן
קַח מַטְּךָ וּנְטֵה־יָדְךָ עַל־מֵימֵי מִצְרַיִם עַל־
נַהֲרֹתָם | עַל־יְאֹרֵיהֶם וְעַל־אַגְמֵיהֶם וְעַל כָּל־מִקְוֵה
מֵימֵיהֶם וְיִהְיוּ־דָם וְהָיָה דָם בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
וּבָעֵצִים וּבָאֲבָנִים: 20 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן

characterizes the region. Following from this explanation, the plague must have resulted from an abnormally heavy rainfall that led to an excessively high rise of the Nile and washed down inordinate amounts of the red sediment. The neutralization of this substance, which normally occurs in the course of the flow of the river, was now retarded, so that the entire river took on a bloody hue. As a result, flagellates and purple bacteria washed down from the high mountain lakes, together with the particles of red earth, disturbed the oxygen balance and killed off the fish, which produced a foul stench.[26]

The Nile inundation, which reaches its height in September/October, has a bearing on the explanation for the next plague as well.

The Egyptians personified and deified the river Nile as the god Hapi, to whom offerings were made at the time of inundation. The flooding itself was regarded as a manifestation of the god Osiris. It is quite possible, then, that the contamination of the river served to discredit Egyptian polytheism.[27] Also, by commencing the series of plagues with the striking of the Nile waters, the text suggests an underlying notion of retribution, measure for measure, for Pharaoh's iniquitous decree that all newborn males be cast into the river.[28]

This type of calamity is found elsewhere in the literature of the ancient Near East. A Sumerian text about the goddess Inanna tells of three plagues that she brought upon the world; in the first she turned all the waters of the land into blood.[29] An Egyptian literary work by a certain Ipuwer, which purports to be a description of contemporary chaotic conditions, mentions that "the river [Nile] is blood" and "people thirst for water."[30] In another Egyptian text, supposedly centering on the exploits of a magician who is one of the sons of Ramses II, the young man tells his mother that should he be defeated in a contest, the water she drinks would take on the color of blood.[31]

*15. as he is coming out to the water* The significance of Pharaoh's act is unexplained. Perhaps it involves some ceremony associated with his morning rituals, or it may be for worship of the god of the Nile during the inundation period.[32] It may also have been to measure the height of the river.[33]

*17. Thus says the LORD* See Comment to 4:22.

*18.* The Nile and its pools teemed with fish, an important ingredient of the popular daily diet,[34] though taboo in certain pious Egyptian circles. The rotting of the fish was therefore a heavy blow.

*impossible* The Hebrew stem *l-'-h* means "not to be able."[35]

*19. in [vessels of] wood and stone* "Vessels" is not in the Hebrew text, but is so understood by early exegesis.[36] However, the Hebrew phrase may be figurative, the opposites constituting a merism for nature in its entirety, that is, "everything."[37]

כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיֵּרֶם בַּמַּטֶּה וַיַּךְ אֶת־
הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיְאֹר לְעֵינֵי פַרְעֹה וּלְעֵינֵי עֲבָדָיו
וַיֵּהָפְכוּ כָּל־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר־בַּיְאֹר לְדָם: 21 וְהַדָּגָה
אֲשֶׁר־בַּיְאֹר מֵתָה וַיִּבְאַשׁ הַיְאֹר וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ
מִצְרַיִם לִשְׁתּוֹת מַיִם מִן־הַיְאֹר וַיְהִי הַדָּם בְּכָל־
אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: 22 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן חַרְטֻמֵּי מִצְרַיִם
בְּלָטֵיהֶם וַיֶּחֱזַק לֵב־פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם
כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה: 23 וַיִּפֶן פַּרְעֹה וַיָּבֹא אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ
וְלֹא־שָׁת לִבּוֹ גַּם־לָזֹאת: 24 וַיַּחְפְּרוּ כָל־מִצְרַיִם
סְבִיבֹת הַיְאֹר מַיִם לִשְׁתּוֹת כִּי לֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתּוֹת
מִמֵּימֵי הַיְאֹר:

25 וַיִּמָּלֵא שִׁבְעַת יָמִים אַחֲרֵי הַכּוֹת־יְהוָה אֶת־
הַיְאֹר: פ 26 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא
אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה שַׁלַּח
אֶת־עַמִּי וְיַעַבְדֵנִי: 27 וְאִם־מָאֵן אַתָּה לְשַׁלֵּחַ הִנֵּה
אָנֹכִי נֹגֵף אֶת־כָּל־גְּבוּלְךָ בַּצְפַרְדְּעִים: 28 וְשָׁרַץ
הַיְאֹר צְפַרְדְּעִים וְעָלוּ וּבָאוּ בְּבֵיתֶךָ וּבַחֲדַר
מִשְׁכָּבְךָ וְעַל־מִטָּתֶךָ וּבְבֵית עֲבָדֶיךָ וּבְעַמֶּךָ
וּבְתַנּוּרֶיךָ וּבְמִשְׁאֲרֹתֶיךָ: 29 וּבְךָ וּבְעַמְּךָ וּבְכָל־
עֲבָדֶיךָ יַעֲלוּ הַצְפַרְדְּעִים:

ח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֱמֹר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן נְטֵה
אֶת־יָדְךָ בְּמַטֶּךָ עַל־הַנְּהָרֹת עַל־הַיְאֹרִים וְעַל־

20Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD commanded: he lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood 21and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt. 22But when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as the LORD had spoken. 23Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this. 24And all the Egyptians had to dig round about the Nile for drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the Nile.

25When seven days had passed after the LORD struck the Nile, 26the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: Let My people go that they may worship Me. 27If you refuse to let them go, then I will plague your whole country with frogs. 28The Nile shall swarm with frogs, and they shall come up and enter your palace, your bedchamber and your bed, the houses of your courtiers and your people, and your ovens and your kneading bowls. 29The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your courtiers.'"

8 And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Hold out your arm with the rod over the rivers, the canals, and the

יתיר ה׳ v. 29.*

*22.* The magicians' success offsets the ominous effect of the plague.

*25.* The NJPS translation connects this verse with the next, implying that the second plague followed the first by a week.[38] The Hebrew could also signify that the first plague lasted seven days, a rendering favored by the Masoretic division of the Hebrew.

## THE SECOND PLAGUE: FROGS (*tsefardea'*) (7:26–8:11)

During their reproductive period, frogs concentrate in particular areas such as ponds and lakes; as the Nile begins to recede in September/October, they usually mass on land. In the present circumstances their habitat had become polluted by the putrefying fish, so the amphibians would have been forced to invade the land much earlier than usual. But the dead fish would have been a source of infection carried by insects, so that the frogs died en masse.

It is possible that this plague, like the first one, was regarded as a judgment on Egyptian polytheism, for a frog-headed goddess named Heqt was the consort of the god Khnum, who was credited with having fashioned man out of clay. She was associated with fertility and was thought to assist women at childbirth. Hence, the plague may have been taken as retribution for the decree ordering the midwives to kill the newborn males at birth.[39]

*26. Go to Pharaoh* That is, to the palace.

*28–29.* The victims are recorded in descending order of social status.

ponds, and bring up the frogs on the land of Egypt."
2Aaron held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. 3But the magicians did the same with their spells, and brought frogs upon the land of Egypt.

4Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Plead with the LORD to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD." 5And Moses said to Pharaoh, "You may have this triumph over me: for what time shall I plead in behalf of you and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, to remain only in the Nile?" 6"For tomorrow," he replied. And [Moses] said, "As you say—that you may know that there is none like the LORD our God; 7the frogs shall retreat from you and your courtiers and your people; they shall remain only in the Nile." 8Then Moses and Aaron left Pharaoh's presence, and Moses cried out to the LORD in the matter of the frogs which He had inflicted upon Pharaoh. 9And the LORD did as Moses asked; the frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. 10And they piled them up in heaps, till the land stank. 11But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he became stubborn and would not heed them, as the LORD had spoken.

12Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: Hold out your rod and strike the dust of the earth, and it shall turn to lice throughout the land of Egypt." 13And they did so. Aaron held out his arm with the rod and struck the dust of the earth, and vermin came upon man and beast; all the dust of the earth turned to lice throughout the land of Egypt. 14The magicians did the like with their spells to

הָאֲגַמִּים וְהַעַל אֶת־הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
2 וַיֵּט אַהֲרֹן אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל מֵימֵי מִצְרַיִם וַתַּעַל
הַצְּפַרְדֵּעַ וַתְּכַס אֶת־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: 3 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן
הַחַרְטֻמִּים בְּלָטֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת־הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים עַל־
אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:
4 וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר
הַעְתִּירוּ אֶל־יְהוָה וְיָסֵר הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים מִמֶּנִּי
וּמֵעַמִּי וַאֲשַׁלְּחָה אֶת־הָעָם וְיִזְבְּחוּ לַיהוָה:
5 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְפַרְעֹה הִתְפָּאֵר עָלַי לְמָתַי
אַעְתִּיר לְךָ וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ וּלְעַמְּךָ לְהַכְרִית
הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים מִמְּךָ וּמִבָּתֶּיךָ רַק בַּיְאֹר תִּשְׁאַרְנָה:
6 וַיֹּאמֶר לְמָחָר וַיֹּאמֶר כִּדְבָרְךָ לְמַעַן תֵּדַע
כִּי־אֵין כַּיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ: חמישי 7 וְסָרוּ הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים
מִמְּךָ וּמִבָּתֶּיךָ וּמֵעֲבָדֶיךָ וּמֵעַמֶּךָ רַק בַּיְאֹר
תִּשְׁאַרְנָה: 8 וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן מֵעִם פַּרְעֹה
וַיִּצְעַק מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה עַל־דְּבַר הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים
אֲשֶׁר־שָׂם לְפַרְעֹה: 9 וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה כִּדְבַר מֹשֶׁה
וַיָּמֻתוּ הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים מִן־הַבָּתִּים מִן־הַחֲצֵרֹת וּמִן־
הַשָּׂדֹת: 10 וַיִּצְבְּרוּ אֹתָם חֳמָרִם חֳמָרִם וַתִּבְאַשׁ
הָאָרֶץ: 11 וַיַּרְא פַּרְעֹה כִּי הָיְתָה הָרְוָחָה
וְהַכְבֵּד אֶת־לִבּוֹ וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר
יְהוָה: ס
12 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֱמֹר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן
נְטֵה אֶת־מַטְּךָ וְהַךְ אֶת־עֲפַר הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה לְכִנִּם
בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: 13 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן וַיֵּט אַהֲרֹן
אֶת־יָדוֹ בְּמַטֵּהוּ וַיַּךְ אֶת־עֲפַר הָאָרֶץ וַתְּהִי
הַכִּנָּם בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה כָּל־עֲפַר הָאָרֶץ הָיָה כִנִּים
בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: 14 וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן הַחַרְטֻמִּים

CHAPTER 8

*4.* The process of humbling Pharaoh now begins. His magicians can add to the number of frogs but cannot remove them.

***plead with the LORD*** Pharaoh acknowledges the existence of YHVH for the first time. He makes a sweeping concession, only to rescind it soon after.

*5.* ***triumph over me*** The Hebrew phrase *hitpa'er 'al* usually means "to vaunt"[1] but here seems to connote "I defer to you" to select the time for removing the frogs.

## THE THIRD PLAGUE: VERMIN (*kinnim*) (vv. 12–15)

In accordance with the pattern, the third in the series comes without warning. The land is suddenly hit by a devastating infestation of insects, identified by some as mosquitoes.[2] These carriers of deadly diseases, normally troublesome enough in Egypt during October/November, would have multiplied astronomically all over the land in the wake of the preceding plagues.

*14–15.* The magicians retire from the scene, their powers entirely exhausted.[3]

upon man and beast; [15]and the magicians said to Pharaoh,
"This is the finger of God!" But Pharaoh's heart stiffened
and he would not heed them, as the LORD had spoken.
[16]And the LORD said to Moses, "Early in the morning
present yourself to Pharaoh, as he is coming out to the
water, and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: Let My people
go that they may worship Me. [17]For if you do not let My
people go, I will let loose swarms of insects against you and
your courtiers and your people and your houses; the houses
of the Egyptians, and the very ground they stand on, shall
be filled with swarms of insects. [18]But on that day I will set
apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that
no swarms of insects shall be there, that you may know that
I the LORD am in the midst of the land. [19]And I will make a

הַכִּנָּם בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה׃ 15 וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַחַרְטֻמִּים
אֶל־פַּרְעֹה אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים הִוא וַיֶּחֱזַק לֵב־פַּרְעֹה
וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה׃ ס
16 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הַשְׁכֵּם
בַּבֹּקֶר וְהִתְיַצֵּב לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה הִנֵּה יוֹצֵא
הַמָּיְמָה וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה שַׁלַּח עַמִּי
וְיַעַבְדֻנִי׃ 17 כִּי אִם־אֵינְךָ מְשַׁלֵּחַ אֶת־עַמִּי הִנְנִי
מַשְׁלִיחַ בְּךָ וּבַעֲבָדֶיךָ וּבְעַמְּךָ וּבְבָתֶּיךָ אֶת־
הָעָרֹב וּמָלְאוּ בָּתֵּי מִצְרַיִם אֶת־הָעָרֹב וְגַם
הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־הֵם עָלֶיהָ׃ 18 וְהִפְלֵיתִי בַיּוֹם
הַהוּא אֶת־אֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן אֲשֶׁר עַמִּי עֹמֵד עָלֶיהָ
לְבִלְתִּי הֱיוֹת־שָׁם עָרֹב לְמַעַן תֵּדַע כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה

*15. the finger of God* A supernatural phenomenon beyond human control.[4]

## THE FOURTH PLAGUE (*'arov*) (vv. 16–28)

The second triad of plagues now begins. Pharaoh is warned as he goes down to the river. The plague cannot be identified with certainty because Hebrew *'arov* occurs only in the present context. Indeed, diverse interpretive traditions already existed in ancient times. The word itself was taken to mean "mixture," and the most widely accepted understanding was "various kinds of wild animals."[5] An alternative tradition understands "swarms of insects,"[6] which the Septuagint and Philo specify as the dog fly. This would be the stable fly, or *Stomoxys calcitrans*, a vicious, bloodsucking insect that can multiply prodigiously in tropical and subtropical regions, given the proper environmental conditions. It is known to transmit anthrax and other animal diseases. If *'arov* indeed refers to this species, it would explain why Goshen, where the Israelites lived, was exempt, for its climate is Mediterranean. At any rate, for the first time a clear distinction is made between the Egyptians and the Israelites, and the time of the onset of the plague is fixed, both particulars leaving no doubt that the source of the plague is not just any god (v. 15) but YHVH, God of Israel.

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distinction between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall come to pass.'" 20And the LORD did so. Heavy swarms of insects invaded Pharaoh's palace and the houses of his courtiers; throughout the country of Egypt the land was ruined because of the swarms of insects.

21Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go and sacrifice to your God within the land." 22But Moses replied, "It would not be right to do this, for what we sacrifice to the LORD our God is untouchable to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice that which is untouchable to the Egyptians before their very eyes, will they not stone us! 23So we must go a distance of three days into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as He may command us." 24Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to sacrifice to the LORD your God in the wilderness; but do not go very far. Plead, then, for me." 25And Moses said, "When I leave your presence, I will plead with the LORD that the swarms of insects depart tomorrow from Pharaoh and his courtiers and his people; but let not Pharaoh again act deceitfully, not letting the people go to sacrifice to the LORD."

26So Moses left Pharaoh's presence and pleaded with the LORD. 27And the LORD did as Moses asked: He removed the swarms of insects from Pharaoh, from his courtiers, and from his people; not one remained. 28But Pharaoh became stubborn this time also, and would not let the people go.

בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ׃ שׁשׁי 19 וְשַׂמְתִּי פְדֻת בֵּין עַמִּי וּבֵין
עַמֶּךָ לְמָחָר יִהְיֶה הָאֹת הַזֶּה׃ 20 וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה כֵּן
וַיָּבֹא עָרֹב כָּבֵד בֵּיתָה פַּרְעֹה וּבֵית עֲבָדָיו
וּבְכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם תִּשָּׁחֵת הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵי הֶעָרֹב׃
21 וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר
לְכוּ זִבְחוּ לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם בָּאָרֶץ׃ 22 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לֹא
נָכוֹן לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן כִּי תּוֹעֲבַת מִצְרַיִם נִזְבַּח לַיהוָה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ הֵן נִזְבַּח אֶת־תּוֹעֲבַת מִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵיהֶם
וְלֹא יִסְקְלֻנוּ׃ 23 דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים נֵלֵךְ בַּמִּדְבָּר
וְזָבַחְנוּ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר אֵלֵינוּ׃
24 וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אָנֹכִי אֲשַׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם וּזְבַחְתֶּם
לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר רַק הַרְחֵק לֹא־תַרְחִיקוּ
לָלֶכֶת הַעְתִּירוּ בַּעֲדִי׃ 25 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה
אָנֹכִי יוֹצֵא מֵעִמָּךְ וְהַעְתַּרְתִּי אֶל־יְהוָה וְסָר
הֶעָרֹב מִפַּרְעֹה מֵעֲבָדָיו וּמֵעַמּוֹ מָחָר רַק אַל־יֹסֵף
פַּרְעֹה הָתֵל לְבִלְתִּי שַׁלַּח אֶת־הָעָם לִזְבֹּחַ
לַיהוָה׃
26 וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה מֵעִם פַּרְעֹה וַיֶּעְתַּר אֶל־יְהוָה׃
27 וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה כִּדְבַר מֹשֶׁה וַיָּסַר הֶעָרֹב
מִפַּרְעֹה מֵעֲבָדָיו וּמֵעַמּוֹ לֹא נִשְׁאַר אֶחָד׃
28 וַיַּכְבֵּד פַּרְעֹה אֶת־לִבּוֹ גַּם בַּפַּעַם הַזֹּאת וְלֹא
שִׁלַּח אֶת־הָעָם׃ פ

*19. **a distinction*** While the context requires such a meaning for Hebrew *pedut*,[9] it is unclear how it is obtained, for the other biblical usages of the noun mean "rescue, redemption," and the stem *p-d-h* invariably conveys "to ransom, redeem."[10]

*21.* For the second time Pharaoh makes a concession, this time more limited.

***within the land*** Not in the wilderness.

*22–23.* The Israelites do not yet know what animal sacrifice the Lord may demand of them. It may turn out to be one that Egyptians would regard as a sacrilegious provocation, given that their religion represents deities in animal form. Hence, the Israelites can only worship their God outside Egypt.

*22. **untouchable*** Moses employs a deliberate ambiguity: Hebrew *to'evah* can mean "that which is taboo" to the Egyptians[11] and also "that which is an [Egyptian] abomination" in the sight of Israel,[12] namely, their animal divinities.

***will they not stone us!*** Would not such a sacrifice on our part evoke a violent reaction?

*23. **three days*** See Comment to 3:18.

*24.* Pharaoh seems to accept Moses' reasoning.

***I will let you go*** The Hebrew adds the personal pronoun before the verb to emphasize the subject. In this way Pharaoh asserts his superior authority while at the same time making a concession.

upon man and beast; [15]and the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God!" But Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he would not heed them, as the LORD had spoken.

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אֶחָד׃ 7 וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וְהִנֵּה לֹא־מֵת מִמִּקְנֵה

## CHAPTER 9 THE FIFTH PLAGUE: PESTILENCE (*dever*) (vv. 1–7)

Allusion to the importance of sacred animals in Egyptian religion is now followed by a visitation that exposes the inherent absurdity of such a notion. The God of Israel strikes the animals with pestilence. Most likely, the soil, contaminated by mounds of rotting frogs, became the breeding ground of disease, probably the highly infectious anthrax, which strikes the cattle in the fields. Once again, the livestock of the Israelites are unaffected, the time of the plague's onset is forecast, and Pharaoh is warned in his palace.

*3. the hand of the LORD* As opposed to the "finger of God" in 8:15. The "hand" is the symbol of power, here exercised both punitively and coercively. In Akkadian, diseases are described as "the hand of Ishtar," "the hand of Nergal," or of other gods.[1]

*will strike* Hebrew *hoyah* is undoubtedly a play on YHVH.[2]

*camels* The presence of this animal here and in the patriarchal narratives is a problem because the camel does not figure in Egyptian texts and art until the Persian period. It is conspicuously absent from the published Mari texts from Mesopotamia, which are replete with information about pastoral nomadic groups and their way of life. Thousands of commercial and administrative texts from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1950–1530 B.C.E.) maintain complete silence on the existence of this animal. All available evidence points to the conclusion that the effective domestication of the camel as a widely used beast of burden did not take place before the twelfth century B.C.E., which is long after the patriarchal and Exodus periods.

The key word in this formulation is "effective," for evidence of another kind does exist. Certain bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian lexical texts from Mesopotamia equate a domesticated animal called "donkey-of-the-sea-land" with a dromedary, thus proving a knowledge of the animal in southern Mesopotamia in Old Babylonian times (ca. 2000–1700 B.C.E.). Moreover, the scribes knew to differentiate between the dromedary and the Bactrian camel, and a Sumerian text from that period mentions the drinking of camel's milk. A braided cord made from camel hair (ca. 2000 B.C.E.) has been found in Egypt; a tiny bronze figurine of a camel from before 2100 B.C.E. turned up at Byblos; a frieze of a procession of typically Egyptian animals, including a camel, decorates a pot (1500–1400 B.C.E.) uncovered in Greece; a steatite seal from Minoan Crete (1800–1400 B.C.E.) features that animal; and a ration list from the North Syrian town of Alalakh from the 18th century B.C.E. in Old Babylonian includes fodder for the camel.

In light of all this, mention of the camel in Exodus and Genesis can be taken at face value. First domesticated in southern Arabia in the third millennium B.C.E., its presence spread very slowly and long remained a rarity. A wealthy man might acquire a few as a prestige symbol. Only much later did it become a beast of burden.[3]

9 The LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews: Let My people go to worship Me. 2For if you refuse to let them go, and continue to hold them, 3then the hand of the LORD will strike your livestock in the fields—the horses, the asses, the camels, the cattle, and the sheep—with a very severe pestilence. 4But the LORD will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of the Egyptians, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites. 5The LORD has fixed the time: tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.'" 6And the LORD did so the next day: all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died. 7When Pharaoh inquired, he

ט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה
וְדִבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים
שַׁלַּח אֶת־עַמִּי וְיַעַבְדֵנִי: 2 כִּי אִם־מָאֵן אַתָּה
לְשַׁלֵּחַ וְעוֹדְךָ מַחֲזִיק בָּם: 3 הִנֵּה יַד־יְהוָה
הוֹיָה בְּמִקְנְךָ אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה בַּסּוּסִים בַּחֲמֹרִים
בַּגְּמַלִּים בַּבָּקָר וּבַצֹּאן דֶּבֶר כָּבֵד מְאֹד: 4 וְהִפְלָה
יְהוָה בֵּין מִקְנֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבֵין מִקְנֵה מִצְרָיִם וְלֹא
יָמוּת מִכָּל־לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל דָּבָר: 5 וַיָּשֶׂם יְהוָה
מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר מָחָר יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה בָּאָרֶץ:
6 וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה מִמָּחֳרָת וַיָּמָת
כָּל מִקְנֵה מִצְרַיִם וּמִמִּקְנֵה בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־מֵת
אֶחָד: 7 וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וְהִנֵּה לֹא־מֵת מִמִּקְנֵה

CHAPTER 9

## THE FIFTH PLAGUE: PESTILENCE (*dever*) (vv. 1–7)

Allusion to the importance of sacred animals in Egyptian religion is now followed by a visitation that exposes the inherent absurdity of such a notion. The God of Israel strikes the animals with pestilence. Most likely, the soil, contaminated by mounds of rotting frogs, became the breeding ground of disease, probably the highly infectious anthrax, which strikes the cattle in the fields. Once again, the livestock of the Israelites are unaffected, the time of the plague's onset is forecast, and Pharaoh is warned in his palace.

*3. the hand of the LORD* As opposed to the "finger of God" in 8:15. The "hand" is the symbol of power, here exercised both punitively and coercively. In Akkadian, diseases are described as "the hand of Ishtar," "the hand of Nergal," or of other gods.[1]

*will strike* Hebrew *hoyah* is undoubtedly a play on YHVH.[2]

*camels* The presence of this animal here and in the patriarchal narratives is a problem because the camel does not figure in Egyptian texts and art until the Persian period. It is conspicuously absent from the published Mari texts from Mesopotamia, which are replete with information about pastoral nomadic groups and their way of life. Thousands of commercial and administrative texts from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1950–1530 B.C.E.) maintain complete silence on the existence of this animal. All available evidence points to the conclusion that the effective domestication of the camel as a widely used beast of burden did not take place before the twelfth century B.C.E., which is long after the patriarchal and Exodus periods.

The key word in this formulation is "effective," for evidence of another kind does exist. Certain bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian lexical texts from Mesopotamia equate a domesticated animal called "donkey-of-the-sea-land" with a dromedary, thus proving a knowledge of the animal in southern Mesopotamia in Old Babylonian times (ca. 2000–1700 B.C.E.). Moreover, the scribes knew to differentiate between the dromedary and the Bactrian camel, and a Sumerian text from that period mentions the drinking of camel's milk. A braided cord made from camel hair (ca. 2000 B.C.E.) has been found in Egypt; a tiny bronze figurine of a camel from before 2100 B.C.E. turned up at Byblos; a frieze of a procession of typically Egyptian animals, including a camel, decorates a pot (1500–1400 B.C.E.) uncovered in Greece; a steatite seal from Minoan Crete (1800–1400 B.C.E.) features that animal; and a ration list from the North Syrian town of Alalakh from the 18th century B.C.E. in Old Babylonian includes fodder for the camel.

In light of all this, mention of the camel in Exodus and Genesis can be taken at face value. First domesticated in southern Arabia in the third millennium B.C.E., its presence spread very slowly and long remained a rarity. A wealthy man might acquire a few as a prestige symbol. Only much later did it become a beast of burden.[3]