

Chapter 12

The Egyptian Plagues— Necessarily Miraculous —And What They Were Intended to Effect

HAVING AGREED with Pharaoh that the frogs were to cease on the morrow, Moses departed from his presence, and entreated the Lord that it might be so; “And Yahweh did according to the word of Moses, and the frogs died out of the houses, out of the villages, and out of the fields, and they gathered them together upon heaps, and the land stank” ([Ex. 8:13–14](#)). The manifest connection between the prayer of Moses and this cessation of the plague of frogs ought to have convinced Pharaoh that it was God who was at work in the case, and that it was futile and insane to continue his opposition. It would have had this effect had Pharaoh been of a reasonable and enlightened mind; but he was neither. He was a small-minded, obstinate man, and his education had led him to recognise a multiplicity of gods, which made the plagues only a source of perplexity and embarrassment; for, admitting their genuineness in a divine sense, he had always the reserve thought that possibly there was a more powerful divinity whom the Egyptian priests might succeed in bringing to his aid. These natural peculiarities in the constitution of his mind were aggravated by a divine hardening (itself a just retribution) which the exigencies of the situation, from a divine point of view, required. It was necessary that he should fight the battle out to the bitter and ruinous end for the exhibition of Yahweh’s existence and power to Israel, the Egyptians, and the whole earth, then and for ages after. This point we have already considered.

It is with the sense, therefore, of a very natural sequence that we read: “When Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, and hearkened not unto them (Moses and Aaron).” There was no further summons at this point, but another blow without ceremony or parley. “The Lord said unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch out thy rod and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt. And they did so; for Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod and smote the dust of the earth, and it became lice in man and in beast: all the dust of the land became lice throughout all the land of Egypt.” Who can imagine the horror that must have spread through Egypt in the presence of this loathsome infliction? Pharaoh had recourse to his magicians. They did their best, but they failed. They tried “with their enchantments to bring forth lice, but they could not” ([Ex. 8:18](#)). Serpents, and frogs, and blood, were within their manipulation, but what could they do with dust and lice? They admitted this was out of their power. “The magicians said unto Pharaoh, *This is the finger of God*” ([Ex. 8:19](#))—a recognition on their part of the difference between what is accomplishable by human art and contrivance, and what can be achieved by divine power alone: not that any of the previous plagues were within the possibility of human contrivance, in their reality and extent, but it was possible apparently to imitate them on a small scale; but here was a plague they could not imitate. Lice were too small to be successfully dealt with. They might be coated with a substance to make them look like dust, but how could they be instantly liberated at a signal, so as to become obviously lice again? Besides, what heart could the manipulators have to conduct such an experiment, with the disgusting creatures crawling on them everywhere? For “the lice were

upon man and upon beast” ([Ex. 8:18](#)).

No: the magicians gave it up. They admitted the action of a divine power in the case. They admitted it to Pharaoh, but Pharaoh was in no mood to be influenced. “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them as the Lord had said” ([Ex. 8:19](#)). Another blow impended, but before its infliction it was deemed suitable to address to Pharaoh another summons to surrender. “Yahweh said unto Moses, Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh: lo, he cometh forth to the water: and say unto him, Thus saith Yahweh, Let my people go, that they may serve me. Else, if thou wilt not let my people go, behold, I will send swarms of flies upon thee, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thy houses: and the houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground whereon they are. And *I will sever in that day the land of Goshen, in which my people dwell, that no swarm of flies shall be there*, TO THE END THAT THOU MAYEST KNOW THAT I AM THE LORD IN THE MIDST OF THE EARTH. I will put a division between My people and thy people: tomorrow shall this sign be.” Note the object of the miracle—which was that of all the Egyptian miracles—that God’s existence and power might be known; and consider the mode of it. It will tax the most brilliant imagination to conceive a more effective, a more unmistakable mode of showing the fact that God was at work—the isolating of a specified district from the operation of the plague: and the fixing of a time for its commencement.

It came out as pre-indicated to Pharaoh. Next day “there came a grievous swarm of flies into the house of Pharaoh, and into his servants’ houses, and into all the land of Egypt. The land was corrupted by reason of the swarm of flies.” Pharaoh could not stand it. He had reconciled himself to the lice after considerable repugnance; but to have his nostrils assailed with an evil odour in his very palace, and to have every pleasure and office of life corrupted and destroyed by this host of flies dead and flies living everywhere, was beyond the limits of human endurance. His only escape was concession to this pestilent Moses and Aaron. He would make a little concession; not too much, enough to ease the plague, but not enough to loose his hold upon his useful serfs. He would let them hold the feast they wanted, but not outside of Egypt. “Pharaoh called for Moses and for Aaron, and said, Go ye, sacrifice to your God *in the land*.” Moses could not accept this concession: but as Pharaoh was in a relenting mood, he adopted a conciliatory tone and argued the matter with him. “It is not meet so to do: for we shall sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians to the Lord our God: lo, shall we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, and will they not stone us?” Pharaoh seems to have been impressed with the force of this objection. The Egyptians, like barbarians in general, had strong superstitions on the subject of animals, holding the crocodile and the cat sacred, and the sheep the other way. He seemed to foresee an increase in the public calamities by the result that might ensue among his own people in the presence of religious ceremonies using for holy purposes a creature they regarded otherwise. Moses urged “We will go three days’ journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the Lord our God as he shall command us.”

This would meet the Egyptian “abomination” difficulty, and every other difficulty as well. Three days’ ordinary journeying would take them to Sinai, and, once there, Moses knew he would be subject to divine direction only as to future proceedings. Pharaoh was willing to agree to the proposal so far. He did not like the distance proposed; still, on the whole, he consented, on the one urgent condition that the plague of flies should be taken away. “I will let you go, that ye may sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness; only ye shall not go very far away; *entreat for me*” ([Ex. 8:28](#)). Moses promised compliance with this condition with all alacrity; for, indeed, it was on this that he wanted particularly to fix Pharaoh’s attention—the proof that God was

working for the exhibition of His name in the deliverance of His people. “I will entreat Yahweh that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people to-morrow; but let not Pharaoh deal deceitfully any more. in not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.” With this rather bold adjuration for a flockmaster to address to a king (natural in the confidence inspired by the divine co-operation in the previous plagues, but otherwise inexplicable) Moses went out from Pharaoh and entreated Yahweh, and Yahweh did according to the word of Moses, and He removed the swarm of flies from Pharaoh, from his servants, and from his people; there remained not one (swarm).”

And now what happens? According to the agreement, Pharaoh should have issued his warrant for the expedition to the wilderness consented to. But no such warrant made its appearance. With the cessation of flies, there was a cessation of Pharaoh’s good resolutions. He possibly thought that with a little patience, the whole affair might pass off: the God of the Hebrews, like other gods, might change His mind, or something might arise to divert attention from the issue which had so far been pressed upon him with such a deadly pertinacity. At all events, he changed his mind: “He would not let the people go.” Whether he officially or in any way notified the change to Moses is not stated; but Moses became aware of the fact. Left without further guidance, he would have been at his wit’s end: for Pharaoh’s permission was absolutely indispensable: how, otherwise, could he lead out of the country a mere mob of helpless people in the presence of a powerfully equipped army. But Moses was not without further guidance. Divine guidance (and that too in its most direct and brilliant form) was the one glorious feature of the whole Mosaic episode from the day Moses first observed the singular flame flicker on the Mount of Horeb, till the day he was angelically interred on Nebo—a guidance continued after his day in forms more or less direct for nearly fifteen hundred years, and suspended only with the Roman dispersal of the Jewish nation to their present but fast-closing exile among the nations.

The guidance came to his aid thus: “The Lord said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him, Thus saith the Lord God of the Hebrews, Let my people go that they may serve me. If thou refuse to let them go, and wilt hold them still, behold the hand of the Lord shall be upon thy cattle which is in the field, upon the horses, upon the asses, upon the camels, upon the oxen, and upon the sheep; there shall be a very grievous murrain. And the Lord shall sever between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and there shall nothing die of all that is the children of Israel’s.” Moses waited upon Pharaoh—a thoroughly unwelcome visitor, but not to be denied. He delivered his message. Pharaoh probably received the message with all royal composure, as is the manner with those accustomed to unbounded authority, but dreading it in his heart. Moses, by divine direction, specified a date for the new infliction—that no evidence might be wanting that it was a divine doing, and no mischance that was about to occur. “To-morrow the Lord shall do this thing in the land” ([Ex. 9:5](#)). And so it came to pass. The dread morrow dawned; and such a cattle plague as Europe has never known began to rage. “All the cattle of Egypt died: but of the cattle of the children of Israel died not one.” Pharaoh was curious on the latter point. He seemed to hope that, by some possibility, the district where the Israelites were located might be no exception to the fell scourge that had destroyed “all the cattle in the field.” He sent to ascertain how the case stood. “Pharaoh sent: and there was not one of the cattle of the Israelites dead” ([Ex. 9:7](#)). Had he found the cattle of the Israelites dead, he would have felt some comfort. He would have concluded that a common derangement of nature had befallen all alike, under an incomprehensible combination of the gods—for he was a pagan and believed in “gods many”: a myth probably originating in human acquaintance with the angels in the beginning). But he found no such comfort. The Israelite stock were peacefully and healthily grazing in the pastures.

The fact did not produce the effect it was calculated to produce. His natural obstinacy was in full play: “The heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he did not let the people go” ([Ex. 9:7](#)).

The next blow was delivered without preliminary. Sufficient time having elapsed to show that Pharaoh’s determination was unaltered, matters were brought nearer home. “The Lord said unto Moses and Aaron, take to you handfuls of the ashes of the furnace, and let Moses sprinkle it toward the heaven in the sight of Pharaoh, and it shall become small dust in all the land of Egypt, and shall be a boil breaking forth with blains upon man and upon beast throughout all the land of Egypt.” Proud men can stand a good deal so long as they themselves (sound in wind and limb) are able to cope with difficulties; but when trouble invades their own persons, especially in the humiliating form of boils, it makes a considerable difference to their mood. Here was a curious case impending—not only themselves, but all their servants disabled in the same way—not able to use their beasts for help in getting about even, because of the extension of the trouble to them. To what straits can God reduce man, even as to what extent and varieties He can and does bless him, without man realising that his well-oiled joints and pleasure-yielding faculties are all of His contrivance and carrying on.

What was there in the throwing of a few handfuls of ashes into the air to cause the dreadful infliction? Nothing as a human performance, but everything as a divine arrangement: for God can do anything and in any way. He willed this mode in this case for the sake of connecting Moses with the result, that the result might be estimated in connection with the demands made by Moses concerning Israel in the name of God, who wills to be known as the God of Israel. The operation (which has been bunglingly copied by conjurers of all sorts ever since)—the throwing of a few ashes into the air took its terrible effect. “Moses sprinkled the ashes towards heaven, and it became a boil breaking forth with blains upon man and upon beast. *And the magicians could not stand before Moses* because of the boils, for the boil was upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians.” Ha! ha! ye cunning magicians! ye were not only baffled in your career of imitation by the turning of dust into lice; but now your own personal movements are arrested by this wonder-working Moses. Ye cannot come into his presence to measure your pretensions and deceive Pharaoh. Ye must “keep your rooms”: ye must nurse your boils; ye must groan with pain: because Moses sprinkled a few innocuous ashes towards heaven—because you are fighting against the Creator and upholder of heaven and earth. There will be a wonderful repetition of this, by and by, when marvellous things will again be shown “according to the days of the coming out of the land of Egypt” ([Micah 7:15](#)). “The nations shall see and be confounded at all Israel’s might; they shall lay their hand upon their mouth: their ears shall be deaf. They shall lick the dust like a serpent, they shall move out of their holes like worms of the earth; they shall be afraid of Yahweh Elohim”: so the same oracle testifies.

What did Pharaoh do now? Was he also kept at home with boils? Possibly; we are not informed how it was with him personally. “All the Egyptians” are said to have been affected; and “all the Egyptians” may have included him or it may not. Perhaps he was excepted in reservation for the finish of the awful programme that was fast destroying Egypt. At all events, he remained unshaken in his determination to hold on to Israel. His firmness in such a situation was something superhuman. Its explanation is found in the narrative ([Ex. 9:12](#)). “The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not unto them—Moses and Aaron—as the Lord had spoken to Moses.” And so there follows the next display of power—this time an appalling display—as anyone may testify who has witnessed even our trifling thunderstorms. But before this appalling display of power, which nearly conquered Pharaoh’s hardened will, it was deemed suitable to make a special further appeal to him—nearly the last. “The Lord said unto Moses,

Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh, and say unto him: Thus saith the Lord God of the Hebrews, Let my people go that they may serve me. For I will at this time send all my plagues upon thine heart, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people (*mark again the purpose distinctly aimed at*) THAT THOU MAYEST KNOW THAT THERE IS NONE LIKE ME IN ALL THE EARTH. For now I will stretch out my hand that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence, and thou shalt be cut off from the earth. *And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up* FOR TO SHOW IN THEE MY POWER AND THAT MY NAME MAY BE DECLARED THROUGHOUT ALL THE EARTH.”

The prominence of this object in the Egyptian transactions cannot be too distinctly pointed out. It forms the key of the whole matter. If anyone read or attempt to understand the Mosaic narrative of Israel’s deliverance apart from it, he will attempt the solution of an unconquerable puzzle. Read as a narrative of human action with human aims, the affair is impenetrable—inconceivable. With the key, all is plain: the means employed, reasonable and intelligible: the difficulties surmounted, manifestly accounted for. And yet this key-principle (forming also the essential principle of the whole Scriptural record, from Genesis to Revelation—furnishing the *raison d’être* of all its transactions, and all its maxims) is the one principle for which nearly all mankind have the greatest disrelish. That God be known—that He be exalted—that His excellence and irresponsible prerogative, and unsearchable power and wisdom be recognised, is reasonable; and to the highest faculties of man, this recognition effectually accorded, is the highest and most ennobling, and enduring of the mental delights of which he is capable. But the highest faculties of man are scarcely developed in the majority of men. Long disuse, unfavourable surroundings, and the predominant activity of other and stronger likes, have dwarfed the power to grasp and delight in God. Themes appealing to human interests or human honour, especially self-honour, are alone powerful to stir the heart of public life as now constituted. The object formulated to Pharaoh in the words under consideration has no interest: is positively nauseating: has become inconsistent with the popular conception of intelligent manly life. This fact is symptomatic of the moral insanity that fills the world, and which will only be dissipated by the means applied in the Egyptian age. The means were effectual then and they will be again. When the nations see omnipotence against them under the manifest control of a directing intelligence, they will open their eyes to the fact forced upon the world’s attention in the days of Pharaoh: that God exists, and that His worship, and His fear, and His love, and obedience are the paramount duties of man. A surrender to the power of this perception will quickly follow its palpable demonstration.

As yet Pharaoh was invincible, as the case required. His attitude called for the words further addressed to him: “As yet exaltest thou thyself against my people, that thou wilt not let them go? Behold to-morrow, about this time, I will cause it to rain a very grievous hail, such as hath not been in Egypt since the foundation thereof even until now.” But mercy would be mixed with this visitation, on the one condition which characterises all Yahweh’s relations with man, as becomes His greatness—an honouring of Him in the recognition of His word in the case, and faith therein: “Send therefore now and gather thy cattle and all that thou hast in the field: for upon every man and beast which shall be found in the field and shall not be brought home, the hail shall come down upon them and they shall die.” Though this offer of mercy on condition of faith with works had no effect upon Pharaoh, it evidently operated powerfully with some of the Egyptians, among whom, or a limited section of them at all events, Moses had doubtless caused it to be promulgated: for we read “He that feared the word of Yahweh among the servants of Pharaoh made his servants and his cattle flee into the houses. And he that regarded not the word of the

Lord left his servants and his cattle in the field.” Things being so arranged and disposed, the hour impended for the crashing tempest. The moment arrived. “Moses stretched forth his rod toward heaven, and Yahweh sent thunder and hail and the fire ran along upon the ground: and Yahweh rained hail upon the land of Egypt. So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt, all that was in the field, both man and beast: and the hail smote every herb of the field and brake every tree of the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail.”

Here, it may be remarked, that much is made by the loud-voiced enemies of the Bible, of the fact that any beasts should remain to be destroyed by this visitation, after the devastation wrought by the fifth plague, as described in [Ex. 9:6](#), where it is testified that “all the cattle of Egypt died.” The objection was urged by Mr. Bradlaugh, in his debate with the writer in Birmingham, in 1876. It may be best illustrated by quoting the questions and answers that passed on the subject at the time, as reported by the shorthand writer:

“Q. Is it the fact that after the whole of the cattle of the land had been killed, God (in the 19th verse) sent a warning so that those that were left might be taken out of the field, and not die?

“A. I prefer you to read it as it is.

“Q. Does it say in the 19th verse: ‘Send, therefore, now, and gather thy cattle, and all thou hast in the field; for upon every man and beast which shall be found in the field, and shall not be brought home, the hail shall come down upon them and they shall die?’

“A. Yes.

“Q. Is it a fact that some of them regarded the word and fled?

“A. Yes.

“Q. Do you consider it probable that they fled away after they had been killed? Don’t you think that an improbability, though the book states it?

“A. The book does not state that.

“Q. Read it. Read all relating to the cattle fleeing out of the field, and see if it doesn’t.

“A. There is no occasion to read anything beside what you have read.

“Q. Is it true that later than that, God destroyed the firstborn of man and beast throughout the whole of the land of Egypt?

“A. Yes.

“Q. All the cattle having been previously dead?

“A. All that did die.

“Q. The words are: ‘And all the cattle of Egypt died. Read from the 2nd to the 6th verse, and say if it doesn’t mean all the cattle?’

“A. It means all the cattle that were meant.

“Q. How much less than ‘all’? Is not all the money in my pocket all the money?

“A. That is a trifling way of putting it.

“Q. Can anything be trifling that helps to clear up God’s Word?

“A. In the abstract, of course not.

“Q. Then please clear up how all the cattle means less than all the cattle?

“A. If I knew all the circumstances which the writer had before his mind, in their details, I could do so.

“Q. Oh, that is your answer, is it?

“A. My answer is that the book, being otherwise proved reliable, my ignorance of the details does not preclude my believing it to be a divine revelation.”

A more effective answer might have been given. There is in reality no such discrepancy as he strove to make appear, and as is generally supposed to exist. “All the cattle of Egypt” that died, according to [Ex. 9:6](#), are defined in the third verse (which states the judgment about to be inflicted) as “the cattle *which is in the field.*” The death of “all the cattle *in the field*” would leave a multitude of beasts in various kinds of shelter in cities and farms. When the murrain had destroyed the animals in the fields, those that had not been in the field would, in natural course, be brought out and take their places, and account for those which, not being brought home, were again destroyed in the field, and those taken home would account for the further destruction which took place when “all the first-born of beasts” as well as the first-born of the Egyptians were destroyed by the last plague.

The appalling combination of hail, fire, thunder, and tempest, coming so punctually to the arrangement of Moses, had a terrifying effect on Pharaoh. The rage of the elements is awe-inspiring in the Eastern lands in ordinary circumstances; but this was no ordinary disturbance of the atmosphere. It was a disturbance specifically produced under angelic manipulation. It must have been as dreadful of aspect as it was destructive in its effects. The darkened sky poured down a continuous torrent, in which were largely mingled hailstones of abnormal size—hailstones large enough to kill every living thing out of doors, and work havoc on all the works of man; the dull roar of the descending storm (sufficient to drown every other sound) was itself drowned every minute by earth-shaking thunder-peals which crashed upon the startled ear with increasing rapidity, shaking Pharaoh’s palace to its foundation and causing man and beast to tremble in their shelters everywhere. In the midst of the terrific roar of the elements, blinding light was every instant sent into every nook and corner by the forked lightnings which shot from the frowning heavens, and which, with an abnormal coherence, retained their form and power on striking the surface of the ground, running and scattering in all directions, until the earth seemed enveloped in fire.

No wonder that Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron, and said, “Entreat Yahweh (for it is enough) that there be no more mighty thunderings and hail, and I will let you go, and ye shall stay no longer ... I have sinned this time: Yahweh is righteous, and I and my people are wicked.” The answer brings out again the object of these awe-striking proceedings: “Moses said unto him. As soon as I am gone out of the city, I will spread abroad my hands unto Yahweh, and the thunder shall cease, neither shall there be any more hail, **THAT THOU MAYEST KNOW HOW THAT THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S.**”