

Chapter 13

The Last Three Plagues, and Israel's Departure

BEFORE MOSES took leave of Pharaoh, at the interview to which Pharaoh had summoned him (to implore a cessation of the awful hail and thunderstorm, offering to let Israel go), Moses relieved his mind of the feeling which was naturally gathering in him—a feeling of the uselessness and mockery of Pharaoh's penitential professions. He told Pharaoh that he (Moses) was well aware that neither he, nor his servants, would fear Yahweh though quailing before His judgments ([Ex. 9:30](#)). Their compliances had only been in the nature of a creature accommodation to circumstances. A dog will get out of the way of stones thrown at him. Evil men will tack in another direction, to avoid calamity. It is not the spirit of understanding that moves them, but the mere impulse to get out of the way of harm. It is the spirit of understanding that God desires in man. He tells them not to be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding ([Psalm 32:9](#)); and as to the sort of understanding, he wishes them to be “wise unto that which is good and simple concerning evil” ([Rom. 16:19](#)). If Pharaoh had possessed this understanding, he would have recognised the hand of Yahweh at the outset and felt only the solicitude expressed by Saul of Tarsus, in similar circumstances: “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” He would have let Israel go. But it was not so. The divine object required another state of things. It required an obstinate, dark-minded, pagan Pharaoh. There is a time for everything. This was the time for such a man. Here he was, raised up for the purpose ([Ex. 9:16](#)). And who shall deny the prerogative of the potter to work the clay into any shape he pleases? The man who denies it shows kin with creatures which have no understanding; but which with a strong conceit, and a loud voice, make the air ring with their dissonant notes of various pitch and timbre, according as they have web feet, beautiful plumes, or long ears.

But Moses, though feeling disheartened as to any effect to be produced on Pharaoh and his servants, proceeded to do the part arranged with Pharaoh. “He went out of the city from Pharaoh and spread abroad his hands unto Yahweh, and the thunders and hail ceased, and the rain was not poured upon the earth. And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart, he and his servants. And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, neither would he let the children of Israel go, as the Lord had spoken by Moses” ([Ex. 9:33–35](#)).

This chronic instability of Pharaoh's purpose must have been much more trying to Moses than we can have any idea of. We know the upshot; and we know the precise object aimed at in this divinely-helped fickleness of Pharaoh. We can, therefore, contemplate his inveterate unreliability with calmness. But Moses, at the time of it, was intent only on achieving Israel's liberation. On this subject he was expectant at every move. Consequently, there must have been a genuine disappointment at every fresh failure in his endeavours. His disappointment finds frequent expression in the lamentations he addresses to Yahweh on his ill-success at various stages. He received, however, the best consolation possible—a divine explanation of the situation. The storm over, the air cleared, the sun again outshining from the blue sky, and a return of cheerfulness in all the land, Pharaoh's resolution to hold on to the people of Israel was

supplemented by this message from Yahweh to Moses: “I have hardened Pharaoh’s heart, *that I might show these my signs before him, and that thou mayest tell in the ears of thy sons and of thy sons’ sons* WHAT THINGS I have wrought in Egypt and MY SIGNS which I have done among them; THAT YE MAY KNOW HOW THAT I AM YAHWEH.” If Pharaoh had not resisted, the signs could not have been shown for lack of occasion, and the knowledge of Yahweh’s existence and power would not have been communicated in the vivid and unmistakable form which the purpose of God, at this stage of the earth’s history, called for. Consequently, Pharaoh’s resistance was a necessary evil divinely arranged for. It called forth such a manifestation of the visible and personally-directed power of God as sufficed to convince Israel of Yahweh’s existence and spread His fame and name among the nations of the earth. By this, a foundation was laid for the operations of subsequent ages, the interdependence of which with the Egyptian wonders will become manifest to reflection, and be more particularly and clearly apparent in the day of the clear and open vision that will come with Christ, the prophet like unto Moses.

Having received this explanation, Moses, with a strengthened courage, returns to Pharaoh to renew the divine demands. “Thus saith Yahweh Elohim of the Hebrews: how long wilt thou refuse to humble thyself before me?” ([Ex. 10:3](#)). But why, say some, challenge Pharaoh for his obstinacy when it was divinely-helped? The answer is obvious. The question in dispute was not Pharaoh’s character. Pharaoh’s attitude was a minor, though necessary element in the situation. The great matter was this: the public and overpowering exhibition of God’s existence and power for the enlightenment of that and all subsequent generations. To accomplish this effectually, it was needful there should be such an opposition as Pharaoh’s to the divine demands, and to have such an opposition there must be such an opposer, and to have such an opposer, he must be provided and helped. He was raised up for the occasion: “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” ([Ex. 9:16](#)). It was not, therefore, a question of Pharaoh’s merits or demerits. But, of course, in the communications necessary to be held with Pharaoh, it was convenient and inevitable that this feature should appear. There is no difficulty in understanding the matter when once the divine point of view is apprehended. Look at it with God’s eyes, and in the light of God’s purpose, and there is no more difficulty about Pharaoh’s raising-up and hardening, than there is about an iron founder hardening, by furnace and steam hammer, a mass of iron intended for fine machinery in a royal steam yacht, while of the same brand he differently treats a portion intended for pocket keys. Look at it with any other eyes, and the matter is environed with all the difficulty that the merely natural-man critic finds or professes to find in it; but to look at it with any other eyes is nothing less than excessively stupid, and logically impossible, for the matter is either divine, or nothing at all. If God was not in these proceedings of Moses, they were impossible, and did not happen, and, in that case, there is nothing to trouble about. If God was in them, there is no difficulty. And we have already seen that it is in reality not an open question as to which of these hypotheses accords with all the facts that have to be taken into account.

Moses, then, appealing again to Pharaoh, tells him that if he persist in his refusal to let Israel go, there will come such a visitation of locusts, that the residue of the field produce that had escaped the ravages of the previous plagues, will be clean eaten up. “They shall fill thy houses,” said Moses, “and the houses of all thy servants and the houses of all the Egyptians.” “They shall cover the face of the earth that one cannot be able to see the earth, and they shall eat the residue of that which is escaped, which remaineth unto you from the hail.” “To-morrow will I bring the locusts unto thy coast ... which neither thy fathers nor they father’s fathers have seen since the day that they were upon the earth unto this day.” If this message made no impression upon

Pharaoh, it greatly alarmed all his people who heard of it, and who had learnt by direful experience that the words of Moses were no empty threats. They pressed the matter urgently upon Pharaoh's attention. They implored him to consent to the requirements of Moses. "Let them go that they may serve the Lord their God." "Knowest thou not yet," said they (after all that has happened), "that Egypt is destroyed?" Pharaoh, a feeble character, though stubborn, yielded so far to these importunities as to have Moses and Aaron recalled. Brought again into Pharaoh's presence, Pharaoh tells them they may go and serve Yahweh; but he wishes to qualify the permission to surround it with safeguards: "Who are they that shall go?" Moses replied, they must all go: "Our young and our old, our sons and our daughters, our flocks and our herds." To this Pharaoh demurred, "Not so; go now, ye that are men; for that ye did desire." Moses would not consent to a compromise, and so the parley came to an end, and Moses and Aaron were driven out from Pharaoh's presence, implying considerable emphasis and heat in Pharaoh's decision. We cannot doubt many of the Egyptians would dolefully lament this rupture of the negotiations. There was nothing for it but to go on with the locust plague, and accordingly the locusts came. "Moses stretched forth his rod over the land of Egypt, and Yahweh brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night, and when it was morning, the east wind brought the locusts. And the locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt: very grievous were they. Before them there were no such locusts as they; neither after them shall be such. For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened, and they did eat every herb of the land and all the fruit of the trees, which the hail had left, and there remained not any green thing in the trees or in the herbs of the field through all the land of Egypt ([Ex. 10:13–15](#)).

It is one of the many symptoms of the intellectual confusion of the age that it is fashionable, and quite the acceptable thing, to suggest that this was an ordinary visitation of locusts such as is common in the East at the present day. If people would only think, they would see in a moment how perfectly worthless and insulting to the judgment such a suggestion is. If it was an ordinary visitation of locusts, why did Pharaoh "send for Moses and Aaron in haste"? ([Ex. 10:16](#)). What possible connection could there be between Moses and an ordinary visitation of locusts? And why were the ordinary locusts so very discriminating as to ravage the Egyptian districts, and leave the region occupied by the Israelites untouched? If it be said, "Oh, that is a mere garnishing of the narrative: Pharaoh didn't send for Moses, etc."; then why trouble to explain the locusts at all? If Pharaoh's hasty summons of Moses and Aaron is a fiction, the locusts are likely to be a fiction too. It would be a much more complete manner of getting rid of the plague of locusts, to simply say there were no locusts, than to say they came in an ordinary way. But then, why offer such explanation at all? Aye, why? It is perfectly gratuitous, perfectly presumptuous, perfectly absurd. There is no ground for it, whatever, except the dogged determination not to believe. The facts compel belief—whether we begin with Christ, who confirms the writings containing the narrative, or study the history of Israel before his time, or consider the inherent character of the whole Mosaic narrative in connection with the appearance of the Jewish nation on the earth. To say the thing was thus and so otherwise than it is written, without any ground for so saying, except repugnance to what is written, is certainly an extraordinary intellectual performance. Yet this is the performance that many people supposed to be intelligent go through every day. In any other matter, it would be scouted as it deserves. Men seem rational in everything except that which pertains to God. In this direction it is true, whether men like the doctrine or not, that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." "The carnal mind is enmity against God: it is not subject unto the law of God, neither indeed can be."

Pharaoh, scarcely recovered from the scare of previous horrors, is brought instantly to his senses by the portentous land-darkening by devouring locust swarms. He “calls for Moses and Aaron in haste.” He confesses his sin: “I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you.” He implores deliverance. “Forgive my sin only this once, and entreat the Lord your God that he may take away from me this death only.” Yahweh Elohim, of Israel, is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and of great kindness. Consequently such an attitude on the part of Pharaoh could have but one reception. Moses, departing from Pharaoh’s presence “entreated the Lord, and the Lord turned a mighty strong west wind, which took away the locusts and cast them into the Red Sea.” The locusts gone, Pharaoh had time to breathe freely. He concluded all might yet be well if he persevered. Perhaps the readiness with which mercy was extended would confirm him in his thought. At all events, he decided that he would not release Israel. He was not long in this mind. Before he had fairly settled in the enjoyment of his new comfort, a new calamity came upon him without further warning. By Yahweh’s direction, “Moses stretched forth his hand towards heaven, and there was 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.” Nothing was more calculated to oppress the imagination than the prevalence of darkness—especially such a darkness—a “darkness that might be felt.” In daylight, men can encourage themselves in any wickedness; but in darkness, from which not even artificial deliverance can be obtained, their high thoughts lose buoyancy, their enterprise is arrested, and general paralysis sets in. Pharaoh gave in once more—at least nearly. He called for Moses, and said Israel might go, young and old, sons and daughters; but he would like to have a pledge of their return: their flocks and their herds must remain. Moses declared the demand inadmissible. Nothing short of a complete release would satisfy the divine demand. The cattle must go with them, “not an hoof should be left behind.” This was more than Pharaoh’s restrained heart could stretch to; his patience snapped here. He ordered Moses out of his presence, declaring he should not see him again, and that if he should dare to present himself, death would be the consequence. Brave but impotent word, O Pharaoh. Thou art in the grip of a higher than Moses. Moses is only a servant—a faithful servant. Moses is able in all calmness to endure the threatening ebullition, and retires. Yahweh informs Moses that the limit of the dreadful programme is now nearly reached; “yet will I bring one plague more upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterwards he will let you go hence. When he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence altogether.” Moses having been instructed as to the nature of this visitation, pays a final visit to Pharaoh. He had said to Pharaoh at the last interview that he would see his face no more. The moment was at hand when they would be sundered for ever. As regards friendly parley, it was true at the time of utterance; for Moses now went back to him, not to negotiate, not even to deliver an ultimatum, but to make a final declaration of wrath. “Thus saith Yahweh, About midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt, and all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the first-born of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the first-born of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast, that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel. And all these thy servants shall come down unto me, and bow down themselves unto me, saying, ‘Get thee out and all the people that follow thee’; and after that I will go out. *And he (Moses) went out from Pharaoh in a great anger.*”

No date was mentioned for this crushing calamity. “About midnight” would describe the time

in a diurnal sense, but would convey no further information to Pharaoh beyond the general sense that it was impending. It would be some days after the message, for Moses and Aaron afterwards went out amongst Israel to give those instructions that affected them in connection with this final blow, which should result in their departure from the land. Those instructions had principally relation to the holding of the Feast of the Passover. They were to separate a lamb for every family on the tenth day of the month (which was to be to them thenceforward the first month of the year). They were to keep this lamb apart for four days, and on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, they were to kill the lamb, sprinkle of its blood on the doorpost of every man's house, and roast the lamb, and eat with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They were to eat it not at ease and leisure, but in haste, and ready equipped for the journey on which they were about to start. On that night the visitation of the angel of death throughout Egypt would force the Egyptians to expel them without time for preparation. The sprinkled blood on the Israelites' doorposts would secure their exemption from the death stroke. of which, individually, they were just as deserving as their Egyptian neighbours. They were afterwards to yearly observe this same feast of the passover, with seven days of leisure and eating of unleavened bread added to it. It was to be an ordinance to them for ever, throughout their generations, with the purpose thus made plain: "It shall come to pass when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote the Egyptians and delivered our houses." Moses further instructed the people to ask of their neighbours articles of use and ornament—"jewels of silver and jewels of gold, and raiment"). There was need for this, for, as a slave and oppressed race for a hundred years, they would naturally be destitute of such things and such things were to be needed in the manufacture of the tabernacle and its furniture, as afterwards transpired, as well as for their individual wants in a wilderness, where no such things were to be procured. The difficulty some people have made about the "borrowing" of the articles is gratuitous. The borrowing in the case was not in the sense of a contract to restore, but simply asking possession; and in the demoralised and panic-struck condition of peoples' minds in Egypt, it is no wonder they gladly parted with whatever was wanted by a people whom they were glad to be rid of. "The Lord gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they lent unto them such things as they required, and they spoiled the Egyptians."

The night arrived for which all these preparations were made. "And it came to pass at midnight, that Yahweh 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 of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all 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 he called for Moses and Aaron by night and said, Rise up and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel, and go. serve ye the Lord as ye have said. Also take your flocks and your herds as ye have said, and be gone, and bless me also. And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people that they might send them out of the land in haste: for they said, We be all dead men."

Israel being ready, made a prompt compliance with the demand of Pharaoh, who had thus changed from reluctance to importunity. It was a very hurried departure notwithstanding the notice they had had from Moses. They were unable to make preparatory arrangements for the journey. They had to march as they were, with dough in their kneading troughs, bound upon their shoulders—not the cumbrous trough of Gentile use, but portable articles that are still in use in the East. It must have been a mighty undertaking to marshal six hundred thousand men, besides

women and children—an undertaking liable to confusion. But then the angel of Yahweh (who soon put in a visible appearance at their head) was with them to help so that arrangements would have a tendency to ready self-adjustment in a manner not exemplified in ordinary crowds. “There was not one feeble person among their tribes.” This is evidence of divine co-operation of a very special sort, which, when taken into account, effectually gets rid of the practical objections that have been raised by such as Colenso as to the mechanical execution of the exodus in detail. If God was in it, there could be no difficulty. If God was not in it, it couldn’t have been done at all. But the wise of this world do not take this simple ground, but, in the most stupid way, with all their learning, mix up things that differ, raising difficulties that could not belong to the enterprise at all if it were such as it is proved to have been—the exhibition of the visible power of Yahweh in bringing a nation from the midst of a nation, for the declaration and glory of His name in all the earth.