

Commentary on Exodus Part 2

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Yahweh's Battle With Pharaoh - The Ten Plagues (7.14 - 12.51)

In the first seven chapters we have seen how God raised up Moses to deliver His people, and how when he approached Pharaoh with a simple request that they might go into the wilderness and worship Him because He had revealed Himself in a theophany there, Pharaoh had reacted savagely and had increased Israel's burdens.

Then Yahweh had promised to Moses that He would reveal His name in mighty action and deliver them, but had initially provided Pharaoh with a further opportunity to consider by three signs which Pharaoh had rejected. Now He would begin in earnest.

The first nine plagues that follow were the intensification of natural occurrences that struck Egypt from time to time. Yet they came in such a way and with such effect and were so intense that they could not be described as 'natural', for they came when called on, ceased when Yahweh commanded, and affected only what Yahweh wanted affecting. They were thus supernaturally controlled natural phenomenon.

Because these plagues were common to natural occurrences that took place in Egypt they were connected with the gods of Egypt, for the Egyptians had gods which were connected with every part of life. Thus the very plagues meant that Yahweh was, in Egyptian eyes, in conflict with the gods of Egypt. However, it is important to recognise that the writer only mentions the gods of Egypt once (12.12), and there only in relation to the slaying of the firstborn because at least one of the firstborn who would die would be connected with a god (Pharaoh). Thus he is drawing attention to Yahweh's dealings with Pharaoh and the Egyptians rather than with their gods. This indicates that while the gods may have had the Egyptians as their servants, they did not have any control of the land or of nature. The writer is clearly monotheistic. To him the gods of Egypt are an irrelevance.

The Overall Pattern of the Narrative.

The first nine plagues can be divided into three sets of three as follows;

- The first three - water turned to blood (7.14-25), plague of frogs (8.1-15), plague of ticks and similar insects (8.16-19).
- The second three - plague of swarms of flying insects (8.20-32), cattle disease (9.1-7), boils (9.8-12).
- The third three - great hail (9.13-35), plague of locusts (10.1-20), thick darkness (10.21-27).

As we have seen in Part 1 the previous section of Exodus has been mainly based on a series of chiasmic and similar patterns which demonstrate the unity of the narrative. Here the overall pattern changes to a more complicated one in view of the combined subject matter, but the underlying pattern is the same nevertheless.

For we should note that there is a definite pattern in these series of threes. The first and second of each of the judgments in each series is announced to the Pharaoh before it takes place, while in each case the third is unannounced. The first incident of each series of three is to take place early in the morning, and in the first and second of these 'first incidents of three' the place where Moses meets Pharaoh is by the Nile, in the third it is before Pharaoh. The second

judgment in each series is announced in the king's palace. The third judgment in each series comes without the Pharaoh or the Egyptians being warned. As these judgments from God continue, their severity increases until the last three bring the Egyptian people to a place where life itself becomes almost impossible, and their economy is almost totally destroyed. The huge hailstones kept them in their homes and wrecked their environment, the locusts ate up what the hail had left and made life unbearable, and the thick darkness kept them in solitude even from each other. They must have wondered what was coming next.

Furthermore in the first two judgments the magicians pit themselves against Moses as they imitate the judgments of blood and frogs, but in the third judgment of the first series, that of ticks, they are forced to yield and acknowledge, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8.19) and from then on they withdraw from the contest. In the sixth they cannot even stand before Moses, presumably because of the effect of the boils which they could do nothing about.

It is noteworthy in this regard that while blood and frogs can easily be manipulated by conjurers, ticks are a different proposition, for they cannot be so easily controlled.

In the second series an important distinction is drawn between the Israelites and the Egyptians, for from then on only the Egyptians are affected, and not the whole land of Egypt as previously. Several times the specific protection of Israel is mentioned.

As the intensity of the plagues increases, so does the intensity of the Pharaoh's desire to secure the intervention of Moses and Aaron for deliverance from the plague (consider Exodus 8.8; 8.25, 28; 9.27-28; 10.16-17 and 10.24), and Moses becomes more outspoken.

In the first series of three judgments the staff of Aaron is used, in the second series of three no staff is mentioned and in the third series either the hand or staff of Moses is prominent. Note also that in two cases in the second series neither Moses nor Aaron do anything. Thus an instrument is used seven times. These overall patterns clearly demonstrate the unity of the narrative.

Another division can be made in that the first four plagues are personal in effect producing annoyance and distress while the next four inflict serious damage on property and person, the ninth is the extreme of the first four and the tenth the extreme of the second four. This further confirms the impression of unity.

The same is true of the wording and ideas used throughout. We have noted above the three sets of three plagues, and that in the first plague of each set Moses goes to Pharaoh in the early morning, either to the river or 'before Pharaoh', while in the second in each set Moses goes to the palace, and in the third plague in each set the plague occurs without warning. Now we should note the intricate pattern of phrases and ideas which are regularly repeated.

We should, for example, note that God says 'let my people go' seven times, the divinely perfect number (although only six times before specific plagues - 5.1; 7.16; 8.1, 20; 9.1, 13; 10.3). This is significant in the light of what follows below.

We should also note that there is a central core around which each plague is described, although the details vary. This central core is:

- A description in detail of what will happen (Plague one - 7.17-18; plague two - 8.2-4; plague three - no separate description; plague four - 8.21; plague five - 9.3-4; plague six - 9.9; plague seven - 9.15; plague eight - 10.4-6; plague nine - no separate description).
- The call to Moses either to instruct Aaron (three times - 7.19; 8.5; 8.16) or to act himself (three times - 9.22; 10.12; 10.21) or for them both to act (once - 9.8).

- The action taken (7.20; 8.6; 8.17; no action; no action; 9.10; 9.23; 10.13; 10.22).
- And an inevitable description of the consequences, which parallels the previous description where given (7.21; 8.6; 8.17; 8.24; 9.6-7; 9.10-11; 9.23-26; 10.13-15; 10.22-23).

It may be argued that this core was largely inevitable, and to a certain extent that is true, but we should note that while there are nine plagues, there are only seven separate prior descriptions, and as previously noted seven calls to act followed by that action, but the sevens are not in each case for the same plagues. Thus the narrative is carefully built around sevens. This can be exemplified further.

For example, Pharaoh's initial response to their approach is mentioned three times, in that Pharaoh reacts against the people (5.5-6); calls for his magicians (7.11); and makes a compromise offer and then drives Moses and Aaron from his presence (10.11). It indicates his complete action but denies too him the number seven. That is retained for Yahweh and His actions as we shall see, or for Pharaoh's negativity overall caused by Yahweh.

One significant feature is that Pharaoh's final response grows in intensity.

- 1). Yahweh hardened his heart so that he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said (7.13) (Yahweh hardening him, and that he would not let the people go had been forecast in 4.21). This was prior to the plagues.
- 2). His heart was hardened and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said, and he turned and went into his house, 'nor did he set his heart to this also' (7.22-23).
- 3). He entreated Yahweh to take away the plague and said that he would let the people go to worship Yahweh (8.8), and later hardened his heart and did not listen to them as Yahweh had said (8.15).
- 4). Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said (8.19).
- 5). He told Moses and Aaron that they may sacrifice in the land (8.25), and then, on Moses' refusing his offer, said that they may sacrifice in the wilderness but not go far away (8.28) which Moses accepts, but later Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go (8.32).
- 6). He sent to find out what had happened and then his heart was hardened and he would not let the people go (9.7).
- 7). Yahweh hardened his heart and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had spoken to Moses (9.12).
- 8). Pharaoh admitted that he had sinned, asked them to entreat for him, and said 'I will let you go and you will stay no longer' (9.27-28). Then he sinned yet more and hardened his heart, he and his servants (9.34), and his heart was hardened nor would he let the children of Israel go as Yahweh had spoken to Moses (9.35).
- 9). Pharaoh admitted that he had sinned, and asked them to entreat Yahweh for him (10.17), but later Yahweh hardened his heart so that he would not let the children of Israel go (10.20).
- 10). Pharaoh said that they might go apart from their cattle (10.24), and on Moses refusing 'Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let them go' (10.27), and he commanded that they leave his presence and not return on pain of death (10.28).
- 11). In the summary 'Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let the children of Israel go out of his land' (11.10).

We note from the above that 'Pharaoh will not listen to you' occurs twice (7.4; 11.9), 'did not listen to them as Yahweh had said' occurs four times (7.13; 7.22; 8.15; 19); and 'did not listen to them as Yahweh had spoken to Moses' occurs once (9.12), thus his not being willing to listen occurs seven times in all (the phrase 'as Yahweh had spoken to Moses' occurs twice (9.12, 35), but not as connected with not listening).

In contrast he entreats that Yahweh will show mercy four times (8.8, 28; 9.27; 10.17), and parleys with Moses three times (8.8; 8.25;10.24), making seven in all. Yahweh hardened his heart five times (7.13; 9.12; 10.20; 10.27; 11.10), which with 4.21 and 10.1 makes seven times. (Yahweh also hardened his heart in 14.8, but that was over the matter of pursuing the fleeing people. See also 14.4, 17. He said that He would do it in 7.3).

His heart was hardened (by himself?) four times (7.22; 8.19; 9.7; 9.35), and he hardened his own heart three times (8.15, 32; 9.34), again making seven times. It is said that he would not let the people go five times (8.32; 9.7; 9.35; 10.20; 11.10). With 4.21; 7.14 that makes not letting the people go seven times. Yahweh told Pharaoh to let His people go seven times (5.1; 7.16; 8.1; 8.20; 9.1; 9.13; 10.3). Thus the writer would clearly seem to have been deliberately aiming at sevenfold repetition, and this sevenfoldness is spread throughout the narrative in different ways, stressing the total unity of the passage. One or two sevens might be seen as accidental but not so many.

Taking with this the fact that each narrative forms a definite pattern any suggestion of fragmented sources of any size that can be identified is clearly not permissible. Thus apart from an occasional added comment, and in view of the way that covenants were always recorded in writing, there seems little reason to doubt that Exodus was written under the supervision of Moses or from material received from him as was constantly believed thereafter. Other Old Testament books certainly assert the essential Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch ('the Law') demonstrating the strong tradition supporting the claim (see 1 Kings 2.3; 8.53; 2 Kings 14.6; 18.6, 12). More importantly Jesus Christ Himself saw the Pentateuch as the writings of Moses (John 5.46-47), and as without error (Matthew 5.17-18), and indicated Moses' connection with Deuteronomy (Matt. 19.7-8; Mark 10.3-5). See also Peter (Acts 3.22), Stephen (Acts 7.37-38), Paul (Romans 10.19; 1 Corinthians 9.9), and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 10.28).

One fact that brings out Pharaoh's total selfishness and disregard for his people is that he only asks Moses to entreat Yahweh to remove a plague four times, in the case of the frogs, the flying insects, the hail and the locusts. These were the ones that would personally affect him the most. The narrative is totally consistent.

The Plagues In The Light Of Natural Phenomena.

We will now try to see the plagues in the light of natural phenomena, recognising that God used natural phenomena, enhancing it where necessary, to accomplish His purpose. While the land waited totally unaware of the forces that were gathering He knew exactly what was coming and what He would do with it and directed Moses accordingly.

The first nine plagues form a logical and connected sequence if we work on the basis that in that year there was an abnormally high inundation of the Nile occurring in July and August. In Egypt too high an inundation of the Nile could be as bad as too low an inundation, and this was clearly beyond anything known. This would be caused by abnormal weather conditions in lands to the south of Egypt of a kind rarely experienced which may well have also caused the effects not produced directly by the inundation.

The higher the Nile-flood was, the more earth it carried within it, especially of the red earth from the basins of the Blue Nile and Atbara. And the more earth it carried the redder it became. The flood would further bring down with it flood microcosms known as flagellates and associated bacteria. These would heighten the blood-red colour of the water and create conditions in which the fish would die in large numbers (7.21). Their decomposition would then foul the water further and cause a stench (7.21). The water would be undrinkable and the only hope of obtaining fresh water would be to dig for it (7.24). The whole of Egypt would of

course be affected. This is the background to the first plague.

The result of these conditions would be that the decomposing fish would be washed along the banks and backwaters of the Nile polluting the haunts of the frogs, who would thus swarm out in huge numbers seeking refuge elsewhere (8.3). Their sudden death would suggest internal anthrax which would explain their rapid putrefaction (8.13-14). This is the background to the second plague.

The high level of the Nile-flood would provide especially favourable conditions for mosquitoes, which may partly explain either the 'ken' (ticks/lice/fleas) (8.16) or the 'arob' (swarms) (8.21), while the rotting carcasses of the fish and frogs would encourage other forms of insect life to develop, as would excessive deposits of the red earth which may have brought insect eggs with them. Insects would proliferate throughout the land (8.16). These might include lice and also the tick, an eight-legged arthropod and blood-sucking parasite and carrier of disease, as well as fleas. This is the background to the third plague.

As well as mosquitoes from the Nile flood, flies would also develop among the rotting fish, the dead frogs and the decaying vegetation, including the carrier-fly, the stomoxys calcitrans (which might well be responsible for the later boils), and become carriers of disease from these sources. The 'swarms' may well have included both (8.21). This is the background to the fourth plague.

The dying frogs might well have passed on anthrax, and the proliferating insects would pass on other diseases, to the cattle and flocks who were out in the open (9.3) and therefore more vulnerable. This is the background to the fifth plague.

The dead cattle would add to the sources of disease carried by these insects, and the insect bites, combined with the bites of the other insects, may well have caused the boils (9.9). This would occur around December/January. It may well be the background to the sixth plague.

Thus the first six plagues in a sense follow naturally from one another given the right conditions, but it is their timing, extremeness and Moses' knowledge of them that prove the hand of God at work.

The excessively heavy hail (9.22), with thunder, lightning and rain, may well have resulted from the previously mentioned extreme weather conditions, but it went beyond anything known and was exceptional, resulting in death and destruction, and the ruination of the barley and flax, but not the wheat and spelt which was not yet grown (8.31-32). (This indicates a good knowledge of Egyptian agriculture). This would probably be in early February.

The excessively heavy rains in Ethiopia and the Sudan which led to the extraordinarily high Nile would cause the conditions favourable to an unusually large plague of locusts (10.4; 10.13), which would eventually be blown down into Northern Egypt and then along the Nile valley by the east wind (10.13).

The thick darkness (10.21) that could be felt was probably an unusually heavy khamsin dust storm resulting from the large amounts of red earth which the Nile had deposited which would have dried out as a fine dust, together with the usual sand of the desert. The khamsin wind would stir all this up making the air unusually thick and dark, blotting out the light of the sun. Three days is the known length of a khamsin (10.23). This, coming on top of all that had come before, and seeming to affect the sun god himself, would have a devastating effect.

These unusual and freak events demonstrate an extremely good knowledge of Egyptian weather conditions with their particular accompanying problems, which could only have been

written in the right order by someone with a good knowledge of the peculiar conditions in Egypt which could produce such catastrophes, confirming the Egyptian provenance of the record and the unity of the account.

In all this the gods of Egypt would be prominent to the Egyptians as the people were made aware that the God of the Hebrews was doing this, and that their gods could seemingly do nothing about it. Prominent among these would be Ha'pi, the Nile god of inundation, Heqit the goddess of fruitfulness, whose symbol was the frog, Hathor the goddess of love, often symbolised by the cow, along with Apis the bull god, Osiris for whom the Nile was his life-blood, now out of control, the goddess Hatmehyt whose symbol was a fish, and of whom models were worn as charms, Nut the sky goddess, Reshpu and Ketesh who were supposed to control all the elements of nature except light, and Re the sun god. All these would be seen to be unable to prevent Yahweh doing His work and thus to have been at least temporarily defeated.

But it should be noted that that is the Egyptian viewpoint. Moses only mentions the gods of Egypt once, and that is probably sarcastically (12.12). As far as he is concerned they are nothing. They are irrelevant.

We will now consider the narrative in detail.

The Commentary.

The First Plague - The Nile is Turned Into 'Blood' (7.14-25).

- a Yahweh says that Pharaoh's heart is stubborn so that he will not let the people go (14).
- b Moses is to go to Pharaoh with his staff and meet him by the Nile (15).
- c Yahweh had said, 'let my people go', but Pharaoh has not listened (16)
- d Now Pharaoh will know that He is Yahweh because He will smite the waters and they will be turned to blood, the fish will die and the river will smell (17-18).
- e Aaron told to stretch out his hand that there might be blood throughout all the land of Egypt (19).
- d Moses and Aaron do so and all the waters turn to blood, and the fish die and the river smells throughout all the land of Egypt (20-21).
- c The magicians do the same with their enchantments, and Pharaoh's heart is hardened and he does not listen to them as Yahweh has said (22b).
- b Pharaoh returned to his house and did not set his heart to consider the matter, but all the Egyptians had to dig about the river for water because they could not drink the river (23-24).
- a Seven days were fulfilled after Yahweh had smitten the river (25).

Note that in 'a' Yahweh says that Pharaoh's heart is stubborn so that he will not let the people go, and in the parallel He punishes him by a seven day smiting of the Nile, a great blow to any Egyptian. In 'b' Moses meets Pharaoh by the Nile, with his staff which was turned into a snake in his hand, but Pharaoh does not consider the matter and returns to his palace, deserting the Nile. The result in the parallel is that the people receive no help from the Nile and have to dig in the earth round about it. The great comparison in both these parallels is between Yahweh's authority and power, and His rendering inoperative the sacred Nile because of Pharaoh's intransigence. In 'c' Pharaoh refuses to listen to Yahweh, and in the parallel his heart is hardened and he does not listen to Moses and Aaron. In 'd' Yahweh's name will be revealed by the turning of the Nile and its tributaries into blood with all its consequences, while in the parallel the Nile and its tributaries are turned into blood and all the consequences follow. The overall consequence is found in 'e', and that is that there will be blood throughout all the land of Egypt.

7.14 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is stubborn (literally 'heavy'). He refuses to let the people go."

The account of the ten plagues begins with this criticism by Yahweh which stresses that Pharaoh is to be seen as blameworthy. His heart is proud and stubborn and self-willed. He is not just a tool in the hand of God. It will also end with the same judgment, although there it is attributed to Yahweh (11.10). So whatever 'Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart' later means this initial statement indicates that it does not mean that Pharaoh had no choice. He had a clear choice to make, and he was making it.

7.15 "You go to Pharaoh in the morning. Lo, he goes to the water. And you will stand by the river's brink to meet him, and the rod which was turned into a snake you will take in your hand."

It would appear that Pharaoh went to the Nile frequently in the morning (see 8.20), just as earlier Pharaoh's daughter had done the same when she found Moses. This was probably in order to venerate the Nile god. Moses was to meet him there with the staff of God which had previously turned into a snake in his hand, and stand by the edge of the river.

The specific continued reference to the snake suggests that it is to be seen as significant in regards to what was to happen. This could well be because God knew how significant the snake was to Pharaoh. When worn as a symbol on his head Pharaoh probably saw it as protecting him from harm. Now he would learn that there was one who could devour his snake and any his people reproduced.

7.16-18 "And you will say to him, 'Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to you saying, "Let my people go that they may serve me in the wilderness." And behold, up to now you have not listened. Thus says Yahweh, "In this will you know that I am Yahweh, behold I will smite with the staff that is in my hand on the waters which are in the Nile and they will be turned into blood. And the fish that are in the Nile will die and the Nile will give off a stench and the Egyptians will loathe drinking water from the Nile." ' "

Moses is now told that he must make the position crystal clear to Pharaoh. Yahweh's command is that Pharaoh let His people go so that they may serve Him in the wilderness. This command will be constantly repeated.

But Pharaoh has refused to let the people go to serve Him in the wilderness so Yahweh now tells Pharaoh through Moses that He will turn the Nile red as blood, so that the fish die and the Nile smells, and so that even those who worship the Nile will refuse to drink its waters.

The Nile regularly turned red annually as a result of high flooding bringing red earth down from its sources, but that was common and did not have major effects. It was then still drinkable. However, Moses declares that in this case the water will be so polluted that it will kill the fish and their rotting bodies will pollute the Nile. The major miracle here is that it will appear to happen at the time Yahweh commands, and in great profusion.

'In this will you know that I am Yahweh.' Once again the motif of 'knowing Yahweh' comes out, and again as a result of His present action. Pharaoh will know that He is 'the One Who Is There to act' (compare on 3.14; 6.3).

'Behold I will smite with the staff that is in my hand.' The staff in the hand of Aaron will be the staff in the hand of Yahweh, for Aaron will stand as representative of Yahweh and of Moses. Aaron will be Yahweh's hand as he is Moses' mouth (4.16). The staff represented the authority of the bearer and represented who he was.

'They will be turned into blood.' That is, they will be turned unusually blood-red and will be unusually 'thick'. The ancients would readily describe any thick blood-red liquid as blood. There would clearly be a change to the colour of the Nile that day in excess of what was usually known, a change that would be very noticeable as the flood waters swept down bearing excessive quantities of the red earth.

The red earth came from the basins of the Blue Nile and Atbara, and the more earth the flooding Nile carried the redder it became. The flood would further bring down with it flood microcosms known as flagellates and associated bacteria. These would heighten the blood-red colour of the water and create conditions in which the fish would die in large numbers resulting in rotting fish and a great stench. The latter would not, of course, all happen in one day.

Pharaoh and the people were used to the Nile looking somewhat red at this time of the year, thus the intensity of the redness must have been such that it amazed even them.

'The Egyptians will loathe drinking water from the Nile.' To the Egyptians the Nile was a friendly god and to drink its waters was a thing to be desired. Indeed typical of the adoration of the Nile is the famous Hymn to the Nile, "You are the Lord of the poor and the needy. If you were overthrown in the heavens the gods would fall upon their faces and men would perish." But now they will rather turn against the Nile and refuse to drink its waters.

'Let my people go.' This phrase, which is first found in 5.1 in the first polite request to Pharaoh, comes at the commencement of the first two incidents in each of the three series of plagues (see 7.16; 8.1, 20; 9.1, 13; 10.3), although in the last it is not under Yahweh's instruction. 5.1 makes up the seventh. It thus appears seven times, the divinely perfect number. (It is an indication of the intricate pattern in the narrative that a seven can constantly be built into the ten).

7.19 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their canals, and over their reed pools and over all their ponds of water. And there will be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone."

'Take your staff.' Three times Aaron is told to take his staff, in 7.9, 15, 19. The staff would have special significance for Pharaoh because it had turned into a large snake and eaten the snakes produced by the magicians. It had swallowed his protection and had outmanoeuvred his magicians. It was a symbol of the power of Yahweh and of Moses and Aaron.

Yahweh now tells Moses that Aaron, as Moses' prophet, is to stretch out the staff of God over the Nile resulting in all water sources being contaminated. This would be inevitable, for all drew their water from the Nile. The Nile was the lifeblood of Egypt on which Egypt depended for its very existence. All its water in the end came from the Nile, and where the Nile and its offshoots did not reach was only desert.

'Over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their canals, and over their reed pools and over all their ponds of water.' This basically covers all water sources, the Nile, its tributaries, the irrigation canals built to irrigate the land, the standing pools and the man made reservoirs. Note the fivefold description of the water sources. In Egypt five was the number of completeness. This may have been a standard Egyptian description for the water sources.

'In vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.' The water in these would not turn red instantaneously, but because water in these was drawn from the Nile, eventually that is all that would be in their vessels. They drew their water and stored it in their vessels, hoping the

sediment might fall to the bottom, and then had to pour it away because it was undrinkable and unusable. It is interesting to note that with the five previous water sources this now makes up seven. Now even their vessels are yielding blood at the command of Yahweh.

'Take your staff and stretch out your hand --.' Compare 8.5 - 'stretch forth your hand with your staff'; 8.16 - 'stretch out your staff'; 8.24 - no action by Moses; 9.5 - no action by Moses; 9.8 - 'take handfuls of ashes -- sprinkle it towards the heavens'; 9.22 - 'stretch forth your hand towards the heavens'; 10.12 - 'stretch forth your hand over the land of Egypt'; 10.21 - 'stretch out your hand towards heaven'.

We note from this that the command to use the staff comes three times, the command to use the hand comes three times, and with the taking of a handful of ashes (a further use of the hand), overall action is taken seven times in a carefully patterned narrative. Three is the number of completeness, seven the number of divine perfection. We note also that action is made towards the heavens three times

7.20 'And Moses and Aaron did so, as Yahweh commanded, and he lifted up the staff and smote the waters that were in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants. And all the waters that were in the Nile were turned to blood, and the fish that were in the Nile died, and the Nile gave off a stench, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile, and the blood was throughout all the land of Egypt.'

Aaron acts but it is Moses who is in charge. And at their action the Nile begins to go a deeper red and darken, the fish die, the stench increases and the waters become undrinkable.

During July and August it was normal for a reddish colour to permeate the water as a result of the red earth brought down by its flow which itself, like the Nile, was beneficial to Egypt covering the land as the Nile flooded and providing fertile soil. But normally the fish did not die and the water remained drinkable.

But this year there was excess of the red earth, and living organisms intensified the redness, and all the fish died and the water could not be drunk. For Egypt this was disaster. They depended on the fish for a food source, and on the water for drink, and both failed.

'He lifted up the staff and smote the waters that were in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants.' They made it clear to Pharaoh and his officials that what was to happen was the work of Yahweh by smiting the Nile with the rod of God in full view.

7.22-23 'And the magicians of Egypt did the same with their enchantments, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said. And Pharaoh turned and went into his house, nor did he lay even this to heart'

The Nile and all its offshoots were now red as blood. Thus the magicians had to find uncontaminated water, either in storage pots or in springs not yet affected by what had happened to the Nile. Once they had done so it would not be hard with their learning and abilities to make it look to Pharaoh and his officials as though they also could then turn it red, which they did, no doubt dramatically. Pharaoh and his officials would be the last to suffer from events. They would be provided with drinking water and with food while the people struggled and went hungry and had to dig for their water. Thus Pharaoh was not prepared to change his mind. He could bravely allow his people to suffer.

'Pharaoh turned and went into his house.' A dramatic description of his refusal to hear. There he was safe from all the problems that would be caused. He could ignore the world outside. He was not willing to heed the message given. 'Turned and went' may signify peremptory action.

In 10. 6 it is Moses who turns and goes.

7.24 'And all the Egyptians dug round about the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink of the water of the Nile.'

For the people it was not so easy. Pharaoh could sit in his house and have his water brought to him, but they had to provide their own water. And they had to find it by digging to find places where the water was not contaminated. The great Nile had failed them. The water they found would not be very drinkable because of the nature of the soil which gave it a bitter taste, but at least it was usable.

We can presumably assume that the children of Israel, having been warned by Moses, had stored up water against this eventuality (note the 'all the Egyptians').

7.25 'And seven days were fulfilled after Yahweh had smitten the Nile.'

The 'seven days' that now passed represented the divinely perfect and complete time, a short time determined by Yahweh, and however long as was necessary. During this time Pharaoh was to be left to think, and then Yahweh would act again. It was only Yahweh Who knew what would come next.

What lessons then can we draw from this passage? There are many. It declares God's power over creation. It reveals His right to make demands on us. It reveals the arrogance of man's heart over against God. The people we live among may not be Pharaoh's, but they are equally rejecting the commands of Yahweh. It tells us that God will bring all sins into account, whether it be soon or in the more distant future, for it reveals a God Who requires obedience to His commandments.

And these lessons will continually be taught in the passages that follow for in this battle between Yahweh's will and Pharaoh's we have a picture of the world in contention with God. God has shown man through His word what he must do. But man is continually obstinate like Pharaoh and refuses to obey His will. Thus must God continually work to bring man into submission, with the warning that if he will not submit he can only expect the judgment of God.

Excursus: Further Note On The Plagues (mainly repeated from the introduction).

We have noted in the introduction the three sets of three plagues, and that in the first plague of each set Moses goes to Pharaoh, either to the river or 'before Pharaoh', while in the second in each set Moses goes to the palace, and in the third plague in each set the plague occurs without warning.

We have also noted that God says 'let my people go' seven times (although only six times before specific plagues - 5.1; 7.16; 8.1, 20; 9.1, 13; 10.3).

Now we note again that there is a central core around which each plague is described, although the details vary. This is: a description in detail of what will happen (7.17-18; 8.2-4; no separate description; 8.21; 9.3-4; 9.9; 9.15; 10.4-6; no separate description), the call to Moses either to instruct Aaron (three times - 7.19; 8.5; 8.16) or to act himself (three times - 9.22; 10.12; 10.21) or for them both to act (once - 9.8), the action taken (7.20; 8.6; 8.17; no action; no action; 9.10; 9.23; 10.13; 10.22), and an inevitable description of the consequences, which parallels the previous description where given (7.21; 8.6; 8.17; 8.24; 9.6-7; 9.10-11; 9.23-26; 10.13-15; 10.22-23).

Note that there are seven separate prior descriptions, and as previously noted seven calls to act followed by that action, but the sevens are not for the same plagues. The narrative is carefully built around sevens.

Pharaoh's initial response to their approach is mentioned three times, for Pharaoh reacts against the people (5.5-6); calls for his magicians (7.11); makes a compromise offer and then drives Moses and Aaron from his presence (10.11).

As might be expected Pharaoh's final response grows in intensity.

- 1). Yahweh hardened his heart so that he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said (7.13) (Yahweh hardening him, and that he would not let the people go had been forecast in 4.21). This was prior to the plagues.
- 2). His heart was hardened and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said, and he turned and went into his house, 'nor did he set his heart to this also' (7.22-23).
- 3). He entreated Yahweh to take away the plague and said that he would let the people go to worship Yahweh (8.8), and later hardened his heart and did not listen to them as Yahweh had said (8.15).
- 4). Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said (8.19).
- 5). He told Moses and Aaron that they may sacrifice in the land (8.25), and then, on Moses' refusing his offer, that they may sacrifice in the wilderness but not go far away (8.28) which Moses accepts, but later he hardened his heart and would not let the people go (8.32).
- 6). He sent to find out what had happened and then his heart was hardened and would not let the people go (9.7).
- 7). Yahweh hardened his heart and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had spoken to Moses (9.12).
- 8). Pharaoh admitted that he had sinned, asked them to entreat for him, and said 'I will let you go and you will stay no longer' (9.27-28). Then he sinned yet more and hardened his heart, he and his servants (9.34), and his heart was hardened nor would he let the children of Israel go as Yahweh had spoken to Moses (9.35).
- 9). Pharaoh admitted that he had sinned, and asked them to entreat Yahweh for him (10.17), but later Yahweh hardened his heart so that he would not let the children of Israel go (10.20).
- 10). Pharaoh said that they might go apart from their cattle (10.24), and on Moses refusing 'Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let them go' (10.27), and he commanded that they leave his presence and not return on pain of death (10.28).
- 11). In the summary 'Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let the children of Israel go out of his land' (11.10).

We note from the above that 'Pharaoh will not listen to you' occurs twice (7.4; 11.9), 'did not listen to them as Yahweh had said' occurs four times (7.13; 7.22; 8.15; 19); and 'did not listen to them as Yahweh had spoken to Moses' occurs once (9.12) thus his not being willing to listen occurs seven times in all (the phrase 'as Yahweh had spoken to Moses' occurs twice (9.12, 35), but not as connected with not listening). In contrast he entreats that Yahweh will show mercy four times (8.8, 28; 9.27; 10.17), and parleys with Moses three times (8.8; 8.25; 10.24), making seven in all. Yahweh hardened his heart five times (7.13; 9.12; 10.20; 10.27; 11.10), which with 4.21 and 10.1 makes seven times. (Yahweh also hardened his heart in 14.8, but that was over pursuing the fleeing people). His heart was hardened (by himself?) four times (7.22; 8.19; 9.7; 9.35), and he hardened his own heart three times (8.15, 32; 9.34), again making seven times. It is said that he would not let the people go five times (8.32; 9.7; 9.35; 10.20; 11.10). With 4.21; 7.14 that makes not letting the people go seven times. Yahweh told Pharaoh to let His people go seven times (5.1; 7.16; 8.1; 8.20; 9.1; 9.13; 10.3). Thus the writer would clearly seem to have

been deliberately aiming at sevenfold repetition, and this is spread throughout the narrative in different ways, stressing the total unity of the passage.

End of excursus.

The Second Plague - The Plague of Frogs (8.1-15).

This can be analysed as follows:

- a Yahweh tells Moses to say, 'let my people go and serve me' or there will be a plague of frogs (1-2).
- b Full description of the plague of frogs that will come (3-4).
- c Aaron to be commanded to stretch out his staff over the waters of Egypt to cause the frogs to come up (5).
- d Aaron does so and the plague of frogs come out and spread over Egypt (6).
- e The magicians imitate the plague and bring up frogs on the land of Egypt (7)
- e Pharaoh entreats that the frogs might be taken away and he will let the people go (8).
- d Moses says that the plague will be dealt with whenever Pharaoh wants, and Pharaoh says tomorrow (9).
- c Moses promises that the disappearance of the frogs will happen and that frogs will be in their usual place only (10-11).
- b At Moses' intercession the frogs die out and are gathered in heaps (12-14).
- a Pharaoh saw that there was respite and hardened his heart and did not listen to them, just as Yahweh had said (15).

Note the parallels. In 'a' Moses is to say, 'let my people go', in the parallel Pharaoh hardened his heart and did not listen to them. In 'b' a description is given of the coming of the frogs, in the parallel the frogs die out and are gathered into heaps. In 'c' Aaron is commanded to stretch out his staff and the frogs come, in the parallel Moses promises that the frogs will go. In 'd' Aaron is obedient and the frogs come, and in the parallel Moses says that he will remove the frogs whenever Pharaoh wishes. It will be noted that all these are the actions of the terrible two. In 'd' we have Egypt's reaction. The magicians manage to turn some water deep red, and Pharaoh entreats that the frogs might be taken away and he will then let the people go.

8.1-4 'And Yahweh spoke to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says Yahweh, Let my people go that they may serve me, and if you refuse to let them go, behold I will smite all your borders with frogs. And the Nile will swarm with frogs which will go up into your house, and into your bedroom, and on your bed, and into the house of your servants, and on your people, and into your ovens, and into your kneadingtroughs. And the frogs will come up both on you, and on your people, and on all your servants.'"

The next approach was in Pharaoh's palace. (Moses 'goes in' to him). The request was still to be able to worship Yahweh in the wilderness. The threat that follows is a plague of frogs. The Nile and its offshoots and the pools around were no longer habitable, even for frogs. And the microcosms, and dead and decaying fish added to the problem. So the frogs would seek other refuges, as Yahweh well knew. They had proliferated beyond the norm and now at Yahweh's word they would invade the land of Egypt, getting everywhere, into bedrooms, beds, ovens, kitchens and domestic appliances. Even Pharaoh in his palace would not be able to hide from these.

The Egyptians, who had a particular regard for cleanliness, would be horrified. Even their food was being contaminated.

'Go in to Pharaoh.' Moses now had ready access, and probably privileged access, to Pharaoh

as a prophet, or more than a prophet. This may have had to do with his princely status but was more likely simply due to the fact that Pharaoh recognised his status as 'a god' under Yahweh, and knew that he could not afford not to see him. He viewed Moses with a superstitious awe that gave Moses extreme authority and conflicted with his own view of himself as a god.

'Your servants -- your people.' The distinction is constantly made between the king's high officials (his servants) and his people.

'Ovens.' Probably portable earthenware stoves.

'Kneading troughs.' Containers where the dough was kneaded, probably shallow wooden bowls (see Exodus 12.34).

8.5-6 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals, and over the pools and cause frogs to come up on the land of Egypt." And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt.'

The assumption is now that Pharaoh has again refused to listen. So the word goes out that the next stage is to follow. Aaron stretches out his hand containing the staff of God as Yahweh had commanded, and the frogs pour out of the waters to infest the land. There is nowhere in Egypt where the waters of the Nile do not reach, for where the Nile with its offshoots does not go there is no life. So the frogs were everywhere.

'Stretch out your hand with your staff.' Aaron is again to act on behalf of Yahweh and Moses. This is the second time that he stretches out his staff.

8.7 'And the magicians did the same with their enchantments and brought up frogs on the land of Egypt.'

It was not difficult for the magicians to imitate this (although they did not really do so. They did not produce a multitude of frogs throughout Egypt). In a land saturated with frogs, it was easy for clever conjurers to give the impression that they too could produce frogs at will. But as with the crimson Nile the plague had already taken place, and thus their efforts were simply marginal. What they could do was lessen the idea that it was all miraculous and beyond the gods of Egypt. What they could not do, however, was restore the Nile and remove the frogs.

The plague of frogs would bring to every Egyptian's mind Heqit, the goddess of fruitfulness, whose symbol was a frog. Here she was clearly powerless to do anything, or was even perhaps on Moses' side!

8.8 'The Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron and said, "Entreat Yahweh that he take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go that they may sacrifice to Yahweh."

Pharaoh was more moved by this plague. The frogs were in his palace, in his state rooms, and in his bed. He was personally affected and wanted to be rid of the things for they were seemingly everywhere. The more the servants disposed of them the more there were. He promised that now he would let the people go into the wilderness to sacrifice to Yahweh if only the frogs were removed. He had asked, "Who is Yahweh?" and had said "I do not know Yahweh" (5.2). Now he 'entreats Yahweh'. He both knows who He is and knows Him by experience. He 'knows His name'.

Pharaoh's behaviour was unforgivable in the light of the times. Moses was the mediator, the

go-between. In men's eyes he would be held liable by Yahweh if things went wrong because Pharaoh broke his word. If any of Pharaoh's officials had behaved towards him like he was making Moses behave (making an agreement that was not fulfilled) they would have been dismissed, if not worse.

8.9-11 'And Moses said to Pharaoh, "You may have this glory over me, at what time shall I entreat for you and for your servants, and for your people, that the frogs be destroyed from you and your houses and remain in the Nile only?" And he said, "Let it happen for tomorrow." And he said, "It shall be according to your word that you may know that there is none like Yahweh our God. And the frogs will depart from you and from your houses, and from your servants and from your people. They will remain in the Nile only."'

Moses accepts Pharaoh's word and tells him that he may choose the time when the frogs cease to be a nuisance. Then they will go. (We are not told whether he spoke through Aaron, his 'mouth'. But he probably did).

'You may have this glory over me.' A triumphant statement. Pharaoh the god has had to admit that Moses is more glorious and powerful than he, but Moses now makes him a concession. He can be given a little 'glory', a little independence, in choosing the time of the departure of the frogs. He can have his wounded pride consoled.

'That you may know that there is none like Yahweh our God.' With Pharaoh choosing the timing there could be no suggestion of trickery. It revealed that Yahweh had total control over the frogs whenever He wished and could remove them at any time.

'The frogs will depart.' Moses knows that it will happen but not how it will happen. In the eventuality it was mainly through them dying (verses 13-14).

'From your houses.' All Pharaoh's palaces were affected. He had had nowhere to hide.

8.12-14 'And Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh, and Moses cried out to Yahweh concerning the frogs which he had brought on Pharaoh, and Yahweh did according to the word of Moses, and the frogs died out of the houses, out of the courts and out of the fields. And they gathered them together in heaps and the land gave off a stench.'

Moses cried to Yahweh and the frogs died out. Moses 'cried out'. The expression is strong. It was one thing to know that the frogs would go, another to have selected a particular time. And Yahweh honoured his prayer.

The narrative is practical. The frogs do not hop back into the Nile. It is probable that, unknown to anyone but Yahweh, the frogs were diseased. Their contact with the microcosms in the Nile and the dead and rotting fish had probably infected them. They may well, among other things, have had anthrax. Thus their death would be sudden. But again the main miracle lies in quantity and timing, and the latter fitting in to Pharaoh's request.

'And they gathered them together into heaps and the land gave off a stench.' The Egyptians hated the stench, but little did they realise that these heaps were a time bomb waiting to go off.

8.15 'But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite he hardened his heart ('made his heart heavy') and did not listen to them, just as Yahweh had said.'

Pharaoh's word proved not to be reliable. Once he thought the menace was gone, and realised they were somehow managing to cope with the problems of the red Nile (although many of his subjects may have disagreed with him) he changed his mind. But the listener is assured that

this was all in the plan, it was 'just as Yahweh had said'. Little did Pharaoh realise that another menace was already building up and would come without warning.

All men have times when they are forced to turn their thoughts towards God, and when they seek God's help. It is at such times that their destinies are determined. Either they become grateful and continually responsive to Him, or like Pharaoh they choose to forget Him as soon as the problem is behind them. Either they warm towards Him continually or their hearts are hardened. In this way they determine their own judgment and destiny, just as Pharaoh was doing now. Many of the Pharisees would later do it with Jesus. Jesus described it as being in danger of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit at work through Him. Here Pharaoh was doing the same to Yahweh in the light of His clear signs. That is why Yahweh can later harden him.

The Third Plague - The Plague of Insects (8.16-19).

This can be analysed as follows:

- **a Aaron was to stretch out his staff and smite the dust so that it became insects (16).**
- **b Aaron did so and there were insects all over Egypt on both man and beast (17).**
- **b The magicians sought to imitate it but could not, and they said 'this is the finger of God' (18-19a).**
- **a And Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had said (19b).**

The basic lessons from the parallels is that in 'a' Aaron reveals his obedience and manifests the power of Yahweh and in contrast Pharaoh hardens his heart and refuses to listen. In 'b' the lesson is that the insects all over Egypt, 'produced' by Aaron, are declared, even by the magicians, to be the finger of God. They admitted that what Aaron did they could not do. Central to the whole incident is the failure of the magicians to imitate God's wonders in contrast to the previous 'successes'. They had to admit that Yahweh was greater than their gods.

8.16-17 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and smite the dust of the earth that it may become insects throughout all the land of Egypt.'" And they did so, and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and smote the dust of the earth, and there were insects on both man and beast. All the dust of the earth became insects throughout all the land of Egypt.'

This time there was no warning. We do not know where the eggs came from. They may have come down the Nile with the red earth, or they may have come from the dead frogs, or they may have been latent in the soil, or all three, but known only to Yahweh the land was covered with insect eggs waiting to hatch. And when Aaron stretched out his staff, hatch they did. He 'smote the dust of the earth'. This would be done in full sight of important Egyptians. It was necessary that they recognised that what followed came from Yahweh.

'All the dust of the earth became insects.' This was how it seemed to the participants. The language is pictorial, not literal. Everywhere they looked insects were there, proliferating among the dust. The whole land seemed alive with them.

'Insect.' The word 'ken' may cover a number of types of insects. The rotting carcasses of the fish and frogs, and what they contained, could encourage many forms of insect life to develop, as might excessive deposits of the red earth which may have brought insect eggs with them. Insects proliferated throughout the land. These might include lice and also the tick, an eight-legged arthropod and bloodsucking parasite and carrier of disease, as well as fleas.

8.18 'And the magicians performed with their enchantments to produce insects, but they could not. And there were insects on man and on beast.'

The magicians tried to emulate the production of the tiny insects but the dust just would not change and insects so small were difficult to conjure with. And in the end they gave up. In fact they themselves could not get away from them. They were on man and beast. Not only could they not use their conjuring to produce them, they had no way of avoiding them. They were uncontrollable.

8.19 'Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of a god." And Pharaoh's heart was hardened (was strong) and he did not listen to them just as Yahweh had said.'

The magicians had to cover up for their inability. They had to confess that this was beyond them and could only be imputed to a divine source. But still Pharaoh was obstinate, 'just as Yahweh had said'. Not aware of the dangers of disease that could follow he did not think these as bad as the frogs. At least they were not in his bed.

'The finger of a god.' In Egyptian texts we find reference to the "finger of Seth" and "the finger of Thoth". This was thus a typically Egyptian way of expressing the situation. We would say, 'God must have had a hand in this'. Note the use of 'God'. They were not thinking of Yahweh specifically, but of the divine.

The sad thing about this episode is that those who professed to be experts in religion were as much in the dark as those whom they sought to lead. It was a case of the blind leading the blind. The magician priests could have admitted the greatness of God openly and called on Pharaoh to repent. How it might have changed history. But instead they nodded their heads wisely and declared that what was happening was a religious mystery. The world is full of people who claim to be religious experts, and who nod their heads wisely and assure each other how wise they are. But unless they respond to the revealed word of God their wisdom is nothing. Like these magician priests they simply utter platitudes forgotten by the next generation. Furthermore, like these magician priests they may gain a great reputation in the world and be lauded to the skies, but it will all prove useless and empty unless they come to and respond to the word of God.

The Fourth Plague - The Plague of Swarms of Flying Insects (8.20-32).

The first series of three plagues being behind them we now come to the second series of three. While the first three have been general and have affected all, the second three are more targeted. In these three plagues the Israelites are spared and the plagues are rather centred on the Egyptians. And as with the first three the first confrontation is on the banks of the Nile.

Egypt suffers from mosquitoes all the year round but they are at their worst during and just after the Nile flood when the fields are still flooded. Their eggs and larvae develop in the standing water. The extra flooding would provide even better conditions for proliferation. As well as mosquitoes, flies would also proliferate among the rotting fish, the dead frogs and the decaying vegetation, including the carrier-fly, the stomoxys calcitrans (which might well be responsible for the later boils), and become carriers of disease from these sources. The 'swarms' may well have included both. They would have been an equal nuisance and an equal threat.

The Egyptians were used to both mosquitoes and flies, which were a constant and dreadful nuisance. But they had never seen anything like the situation that now developed.

- a Moses was to meet Pharaoh by the Nile, and must declare that he must allow Yahweh's

- people to go and serve Him by worship and offerings (compare 7.15). (20).
- b If he does not there will be swarms of flying insects throughout the land of Egypt (21).
- c But in Goshen where His people are there will be no flying insects, this is so that he will know the great power of Yahweh (Pharaoh could do nothing about the insects, but Yahweh was in complete control) (22).
- d The result will be that He sets a deliverance between the Egyptians and His own people (23a).
- e The sign will come on the morrow (of the overwhelming power of the Lord Yahweh) (23b).
- f And Yahweh did so. He brought flying insects throughout the whole land. The land was corrupted as a result of the flying insects (24).
- g Pharaoh call Moses and Aaron and tells them that they may go and sacrifice, but only in the land of Egypt (25).
- g Moses points out that they cannot because their sacrifices are of such a nature that they will cause disquiet among the Egyptians (26).
- f He insists that they must go a short journey into the wilderness and sacrifice there to Yahweh their God as He shall command (they could not sacrifice to Him in a corrupted land). Then Pharaoh says that he will allow them to go into the wilderness, only they must not go far away (27-28a).
- e He then asks Moses to entreat with Yahweh on his behalf (another sign emphasising the power of Yahweh. It is the inferior who entreats with the superior) (28b).
- d Moses says he will entreat Yahweh, so that the flying insects may go, (thus they all may also experience Yahweh's deliverance), but warns Pharaoh against practising deceit by not letting the people go (29).
- c Moses went out from Pharaoh's presence and entreated Yahweh (30).
- b Yahweh does according to the word of Moses and removes the swarms of flying insects so that there 'remained not one' (31).
- a And Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time as well, and would not let the people go (32).

In 'a' as usual we have 'let my people go' paralleled with Pharaoh hardening his heart. In 'b' the warning that there will be flying insects is paralleled with the removal of the flying insects. In 'c' for Yahweh's people in Goshen there were no flying insects, while in the parallel Pharaoh could not get rid of them without the help of Moses. In 'd' there is deliverance for Yahweh's people in contrast with the Egyptians, and through that deliverance and contrast Pharaoh will 'know Yahweh' (verse 22) whereas in the parallel the hope of deliverance for the Egyptians lies with Moses, who in promising it warns against deceit. Pharaoh must know Yahweh. In 'e' the sign of Yahweh's overwhelming power will come on the morrow, while in the parallel Pharaoh the god-king has to entreat Yahweh through Moses, a sign of Yahweh's overwhelming power. In 'f' Yahweh brings the flying insects into Egypt and the land is 'corrupted' (the word usually means destroyed but can also indicate moral corruption, compare 32.7; Genesis 6.11, 12, 13, 17; 38.9; Deuteronomy 4.16, 25; 9.12; 31.29; 32.5; or for being marred - Leviticus 19.27), in the parallel Moses insists that Israel must leave the (corrupted) land in order to sacrifice. In 'g' Pharaoh tells Moses that they must sacrifice in the land. In the parallel Moses says that they cannot because of the nature of their sacrifices. When it comes to worshipping Yahweh Egypt is no place for it.

8.20-23 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh. Lo, he comes out to the water. And say to him, "Thus says Yahweh, let my people go that they may serve me. Or else, if you will not let my people go, behold I will send swarms of flying insects on you and on your servants, and on your people and into your houses, and the houses of the Egyptians will be full of swarms of flying insects and also the ground on which they are. And I will sever in that day the land of Goshen in which my people dwell, that no swarms of flying insects will be there, to the end that you may know that I am Yahweh in the midst of the earth. And I will put a division between my people and your people. By tomorrow will this sign

be.” ’

Moses was again to approach Pharaoh early in the morning, as he came to the Nile to venerate it and receive its blessing. This is the second time that Moses has approached him while worshipping at the Nile. It may be that Yahweh deliberately chose such occasions because they weakened Pharaoh's right to deny the Israelites the same opportunity of worshipping Yahweh. Or it may have been intended to challenge Pharaoh about the power of the Nile god. Negotiations would take place in the very presence of the Nile god, but he would be unable to do anything about it.

The warning was to be given that if God's people cannot go and 'serve' Him as Pharaoh now 'serves' the Nile then the next plague will come, a plague of excessive swarms of flying insects, and these will be everywhere. They will be inescapable. Others see these insects as a particularly vicious type of beetle.

The only exception would be the land of Goshen where His people lived. Their lives were still burdened by slavery but they would not suffer this latest plague. If they were mosquitoes this was remarkable as Goshen usually had more than its fair share of mosquitoes, demonstrating again the hand of Yahweh. (The excessive disease carrying swarms are what they would escape. They would still probably have to endure flies and mosquitoes in the normal way). But they could easily have been something even more dreadful.

'Swarms.' The word is only used of this plague (both here and in Psalms 78.45 and 105.31). It comes from a root 'to mix' and expresses the idea of dense swarms or possibly incessant motion, and may include a variety of swarming insects.

'I will put a division.' Literally 'set a deliverance'. One side will be delivered, the other will not.

'That you may know that I am Yahweh in the midst of the earth.' Pharaoh had said earlier that he did not recognise Yahweh (5.2). Now he will indeed know Him, whether he wants to or not, for He is there and active.

'By tomorrow will this sign be.' The remarkable distinction will be a clear sign of the power and favour of Yahweh, and it was to come on the morrow.

8.24 'And Yahweh did so. And there came grievous swarms of flying insects into the house of Pharaoh and into his servants houses. And in all the land of Egypt the land was corrupted by reason of the swarms of flying insects.'

It is emphasised here that the house of Pharaoh and his high officials were especially affected. The plagues were now getting nearer to home, and Pharaoh's helplessness in the face of them was being revealed. But apart from Goshen the whole land was affected. Their people were becoming aware that the mighty Horus (the living Pharaoh was believed to be the god Horus) was helpless against Yahweh.

'Corrupted.' The word commonly means 'destroyed', but regularly refers to moral corruption, and sometimes to being marred (compare 32.7; Genesis 6.11, 12, 13, 17; 38.9; Deuteronomy 4.16, 25; 9.12; 31.29; 32.5; or for being marred - Leviticus 19.27). The point being made is of the devastating effect that they had, so much so that Pharaoh compromises. They did not just destroy the land, they made it distasteful. This particular word would support the suggestion that the insects were a particularly vicious and ravenous form of beetle. Some kinds of beetles were sacred to the Egyptians which would make the situation even more difficult. It would certainly not be a land where Yahweh could be worshipped in purity.

8.25 'And Pharaoh called for Moses and for Aaron and said, "You go, sacrifice to your God in the land."'

So Pharaoh, driven to distraction, offered to let the children of Israel offer sacrifices and serve God in a festival, but only within the land of Egypt, not in the wilderness. He would give them time off for their worship, but they must not leave the country.

8.26 'And Moses said, "It is not satisfactory to do so. For we will sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians to Yahweh our God. Look, shall we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes and they not stone us?"'

But Moses argued that this compromise was not suitable because of the nature of their sacrifices and the way in which they would sacrifice them. Their actions would be seen as an abomination by the Egyptians who saw some of the animals as sacred, and would consider that they were not sacrificing them in the right way. Can Pharaoh not see that thus the Egyptians would be incensed and would riot and attack them for their sacrilege? Stoning was not an official form of punishment in Egypt. The idea is that the Egyptians would riot and use any weapon that lay to hand.

8.27 "We will go three days journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to Yahweh our God as He shall command us."

So Moses insists on a short journey, a 'three day journey', into the wilderness where they may sacrifice to Yahweh in accordance with His commands, in a place suitable for worshipping Yahweh.

8.28 'And Pharaoh said, "I will let you go that you may sacrifice to Yahweh your God in the wilderness, only you shall not go very far away. Entreat for me."'

Pharaoh now concedes almost all the ground. 'Not very far' rather than a 'three days journey'. The difference in distance is minimal and probably a face saver.

'Entreat for me.' Here was a humiliation indeed. The great Pharaoh was pleading with Moses as a prophet to plead for him with his own God Who was thereby acknowledge as being more powerful than he. It should be noted that he is asking Moses to entreat on the basis of the terms discussed. Thus for Pharaoh to back down would be a breach of treaty and would be seen as a serious offence deserving of severe punishment. (The word is not specifically a treaty word but the context makes it so).

8.29-31 'And Moses said, "Behold I go out from you, and I will entreat Yahweh that the swarms of flying insects may depart from Pharaoh, from his servants and from his people tomorrow. Only let not Pharaoh deal deceitfully any more in not letting the people go to sacrifice to Yahweh." And Moses went out from Pharaoh and entreated Yahweh, and Yahweh did according to the word of Moses, and he removed the swarms of flying insects from Pharaoh, from his servants and from his people. There remained not one.'

Moses accepts the compromise, agrees to entreat for him on the basis of it because he is acknowledging that only Yahweh can deliver in such a case, and warns Pharaoh against failing to fulfil his obligations under the agreement. He will ask Yahweh that the swarms of flying insects might depart, but he knows by now that this Pharaoh is not to be trusted and warns him against proving false to his promise of letting them go and sacrifice to Yahweh. Yahweh is doing what He is about to do because Pharaoh is to some extent acknowledging that he 'knows Yahweh as the One Who is in the midst of the earth', the One Who can deliver (verses 22-23). Let him not then back down from it.

'And Moses went out from Pharaoh and entreated Yahweh.' These words are heavy with significance. Pharaoh was used to men entering his presence in order to entreat with him because they saw him as a power amongst the gods. But Moses departs the other way, for he has a more powerful Being to entreat. He departed from Pharaoh and entreated Yahweh.

He entreated Yahweh to remove the swarms, and it is stressed that Yahweh did so in accordance with the word of Moses. Not one remained. Moses may not be good at the flowery speeches, but his word is powerfully effective in performing wonders. And he is good at the hard bargaining, for although it may well be that the conversation was taking place through intermediaries, (for Aaron was with him), the final decisions lay with him.

'There remained not one.' Probably not intended to be pressed too literally. The point is that they would all appear to have disappeared so that no trace of one could be seen.

8.32 'And Pharaoh hardened his heart (made his heart heavy) this time as well and he did not let the people go.'

Pharaoh clearly now felt that there was not much else Yahweh could now do, for he again changed his mind once the danger was removed. We must presume he thought that treaties with slaves and Habiru under duress did not need to be observed. But his dishonesty and intransigence was building up trouble for the future, not only for himself but for his people. We should remember that our sins always affect the future and always affect others.

The further lesson that we learn from this plague, on top of what we have already pointed out, is God's care of His own. In all His dealings He distinguishes between those who are His people and respond to Him, and those who do not.

The Fifth Plague - The Plague of a Deadly Cattle Sickness (9.1-7).

Up to this point the inflictions had mainly been to do with people. Now the wealth of the Egyptians was to be attacked. The attacks were increasing in intensity. That would really hit at their hearts for their very existence was being threatened.

- a Yahweh tells Moses to go and command Pharaoh that he let Yahweh's people go (as he had promised) (1).
- b If he refuses the hand of Yahweh will be on the cattle throughout the land and they will be severely diseased (2-3).
- c Yahweh will make a difference between the cattle of Egypt and the cattle of Israel. None of Israel's cattle will die (4).
- d Yahweh appoints a set time for His action (5a).
- d On the morrow Yahweh will do this thing to the land (5b).
- c And on the morrow He did so. All the cattle of Egypt died (cattle of all types in all parts of Egypt, all who were outside and were smitten) but of Israel not one died (6).
- b And Pharaoh sent and (while all Egypt's cattle were diseased) not one of the cattle of Israel were dead (7a).
- a But Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not let the children of Israel go (7b).

The parallels give a continual contrast between Yahweh's action on behalf of His people and as against Egypt.

9.1-4 'Then Yahweh said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and tell him, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, Let my people go that they may serve me, for if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, the hand of Yahweh is on your cattle which are in the field, on the horses, on the asses, on the camels, on the herds and on the flocks. There will be a very grievous

disease. And Yahweh will make a difference between the cattle of Israel and the cattle of Egypt, and nothing will die of all that belongs to the children of Israel."

The call came yet again for Pharaoh to let the children of Israel worship Yahweh in the wilderness, for if he refused this time the hand of Yahweh would bring grievous disease on the Egyptian cattle. The fact that the cattle of Israel would not be affected suggests that the disease would come from the swarms of flying insects and not directly from the diseased frogs, for the flying insects too were excluded from the territory of the children of Israel.

'The hand of Yahweh.' Compare 7.4. The hand represents God working in power and in judgment (see Deuteronomy 2.15; 7.8; Judges 2.15; 1 Samuel 5.6).

'Horses.' Prior to the coming of the Hyksos horses had been rare in Egypt. They were now more plentiful and their main use was at first military, but they gradually began to be used in farming. Asses were commonplace and used widely.

'Camels'. Domesticated camels were comparatively rare in Egypt even at this time when they were well known elsewhere, but a camel-skull was discovered in the Fayum province dating to before 1400 BC and from the Memphis region comes a figure of a camel with two water jars datable by associated material to 13th Century BC. Thus domestic camels were known. Note the order, horses the most valuable, asses the most plentiful, camels third because rare and little used, and then the herds and flocks.

'A grievous disease.' Probably brought and passed on by the flying insects.

'The cattle of Israel.' Events and the contrast with Egypt were helping to make 'the children of Israel' be designated as a distinctive people. At this stage the word 'Israel' by itself (excluding 'the children of' or 'the congregation of' or 'the elders of' (3.16,18) which still linked the people directly to Jacob) was only used when addressing Pharaoh, or by Pharaoh (4.22; 5.1, 2; 9.4), until 14.30, 31 when a national identity had been established (but see 11.7. Yahweh already sees the distinction). Pharaoh does once speak of 'the children of Israel', but only once in a situation where he no longer feels contempt for them but recognises them as the favoured of Yahweh (12.31).

9.5-7a 'And Yahweh appointed a set time saying, "Tomorrow Yahweh will do this thing in the land." And Yahweh did that thing on the morrow, and all the cattle of Egypt died. But of the cattle of the children of Israel not one died. And Pharaoh sent and behold, there was not so much as one of the cattle of the Israelites dead.'

'Yahweh appointed a set time.' This time the choice was not given to Pharaoh (compare 8.9-10). Yahweh was sovereign over affairs. This, like all the other plagues, was to be seen as under the direct control of Yahweh. It was the first plague in which the property of Egyptians has been directly affected.

'All the cattle of Egypt.' All, that is, that were 'in the field' (9.3), in other words those being kept outside and more vulnerable to the swarms of flying insects. However here the word 'all' is probably a general word meaning 'every kind of' cattle 'all over Egypt' signifying the great majority (notice that it does not say 'not one was left alive' - compare verse 7a of the Israelite cattle). We can compare the use of 'all' in such verses as Genesis 41.57; 47.14,15; 2 Samuel 11.18; 1 Kings 4.34. See also Genesis 6.21; 24.1; 29.22; 31.6; 45.13; Exodus 18.1, 8, 14; 33.19; Numbers 14.2; Deuteronomy 2.32; 1 Samuel 8.20; 25.1; 30.16; 2 Samuel 5.17; 2 Kings 19.11 and often.

Bulls and cows were sacred to the Egyptians, and on death were often embalmed. Great

cemeteries of embalmed cattle have been discovered there. These multiplicities of deaths would therefore cause a huge embalming problem. Furthermore the god Apis was in the form of a bull and Hathor the goddess of love was often represented in the form of a cow. Yet they could do nothing about this disease. Thus this plague hit at the very heart of Egyptian religion.

'And Pharaoh sent --'. He was not unmoved and he checked to see whether what Moses had said was true, and found that it was.

'The Israelites.' This is the first use of the term in English versions. Yitsrael is here the shortened form of 'children of Israel' and therefore means Israelites, although it could equally be translated 'Israel'. Note that it is used in regard to the intentions of Pharaoh who knows the people as 'Israel' (4.22; 5.2). It thus reflects what his command would be.

9.7b 'But the heart of Pharaoh was stubborn (heavy) and he did not let the people go.'

The whole thing had become a matter of pride and Pharaoh was very proud. Here he was, one among the gods of Egypt, destined (in his own eyes) to rule the underworld, subservient to no one, being told what to do by the God of the Hebrews, and he did not like it. And he had been used to always having his own way. This was an unusual situation for him. Once things had settled down his obstinacy resurfaced.

We are reminded by this plague that all that we have comes from God, and belongs to God. In the end these cattle were His own for He had created them. We should therefore learn to give thanks daily for all that we possess, for all we have is as a result of His graciousness. And in the end it is He Who determines whether we retain it or lose it.

The Sixth Plague - The Plague of Boils (9.8-12).

Like the third plague in the first series this plague follows immediately after the previous one in the second series without warning.

- a Yahweh directs Moses and Aaron to sprinkle towards heaven ashes from a furnace. The ashes will become small dust and produce blisters and sores on both man and beast (9).
- b And Moses and Aaron do as they are commanded with the result that it became the cause of sores and blisters on both man and beast (10).
- b Even the magicians were affected. They could not remain their to provide their support to Pharaoh and stand before Moses because of the boils. Like all of Egypt they were affected by them (11).
- a And Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not listen to them as Yahweh had spoken to Moses (12).

In this terse description of the sixth plague the stark facts are briefly laid out. In 'a', on the one hand is Yahweh, powerful and effective, on the other in the parallel is Pharaoh, obstinate and truculent, for just as Yahweh's will is being done with regard to the dust, so is it being done in the life of Pharaoh. Furthermore there is in 'b' the contrast between Moses and Aaron and the magicians of Egypt, Moses and Aaron triumphant in obedience, the magicians of Egypt having to go away and hide.

9.8-10 'And Yahweh said to Moses and to Aaron, "Take for yourselves handfuls of ashes of the furnace and let Moses sprinkle it toward the heaven in the sight of Pharaoh, and it will become small dust over all the land of Egypt and will be a sore breaking out with blisters on man and on beast throughout all the land of Egypt." And they took ashes of the furnace and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses sprinkled it up towards heaven and it became a sore breaking out

in blisters on man and on beast.'

Ashes from a furnace are to be taken before Pharaoh and Moses then sprinkles it into the heavens. As elsewhere with the sprinkling of blood (compare 24.6, 8) this is an application of the significance of what is being sprinkled. The fires of the furnace of Egypt which have been afflicting Yahweh's people (Deuteronomy 4.20) will now be applied to the Egyptians. The result will be sores and blisters on both men and cattle throughout Egypt.

And Moses and Aaron do as they are commanded and the whole of Egypt is affected by sores and blisters. Unlike the magicians Moses and Aaron do not have to go away and hide.

Diseases of the skin were common in Egypt and the 'sore of Egypt' was a byword (Deuteronomy 28.27). But this broke out all over Egypt in a mass epidemic with disfiguring and unpleasant blisters. Goshen is not said to be excluded from this and it may have resulted from the ticks, fleas and other insects in 8.16. It was seemingly not deadly but very unpleasant. (Although verse 11 may be seen as suggesting that only the Egyptians were affected).

'Ashes (or soot) of the furnace.' Both words are rare, the former being found only here. In Genesis 19.28 and Exodus 19.18 reference is made to smoke going up from a 'furnace', as a sign of judgment and of the awesomeness of God's presence, and that is probably the idea here. The soot from the side of the kiln in which the furnace would burn was thrown upwards to depict the ash-filled smoke of the furnace as a symbol of judgment from Yahweh, and its effects were seen throughout Egypt.

In Deuteronomy 4.20 Egypt is likened to an iron furnace. The way they treated others would now rebound on them.

Furthermore the furnaces would provide the tools for the slaves and stood as a witness to the building works of the Pharaohs. Thus this was a solemn act that connected the plagues directly with the treatment of God's people. The very equipment which had been the source of such misery to the Israelites, would now be the source of misery to all Egypt.

'Toward the heaven.' What is to happen is to be seen as from Yahweh.

9.11 'And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the sores, for the sores were on the magicians and on all the Egyptians.'

Clearly the magicians had previously been present when the judgments were in progress so that they might counter them as best they might, even though their efforts had been of little use. Now their absence was cause for comment. As priests as well as magicians the disease would be particularly obnoxious to them. They had a great concern for ritual cleanliness. The practise of many of them was to bathe themselves at least four times a day, and to shave their whole bodies every second day. They wore only linen in their efforts to keep themselves ceremonially pure. But now they would be ceremonially unclean, and thus they could not stand before Moses in the presence of the Pharaoh. They would feel this even more than the boils.

And in contrast with these magician priests, covered in boils, were Moses and Aaron, standing there free from boils, an evidence of their total control over all that was happening. If anything could reveal the powerlessness of these magician priests it was this.

'On all the Egyptians.' Again a generality showing that it was widespread in each district and countrywide. It may or may not have excluded non-Egyptians ('Egyptians' may be a general term referring to all who lived there who were not Israelites). Perhaps Egyptians were particularly vulnerable to it.

9.12 'And Yahweh hardened (made strong) the heart of Pharaoh and he did not listen to them, just as Yahweh had said to Moses.'

Pharaoh's resistance continued. He had become almost unmoveable. It may be that he had not been infected by the insects for he lived in semi-exclusion in a great palace and possibly did not tend to walk around on the ground outside, especially at times like these.

The Seventh Plague - The Plague of Great Hail Such as Had Never Been in Egypt (9.13-35).

We now come to the third series of plagues which this time come as judgments from the heavens, the great hail and mighty thunderstorm, the huge cloud of locusts, and finally the plague of thick darkness. All are portents from the heavens. All bring darkness of one kind or another. It is a dark time for Egypt.

Pharaoh was now approached again and this time the warning is more severe. Disease has been rife and the cattle have been decimated but he is still unyielding. Now the attack is to be made on what cattle remain, on any man foolish enough to remain in the fields and on the crops of Egypt which had as yet not been largely affected. The food supply of Egypt was thus to be the next target, and death would visit the Egyptians, and other Egyptians would have to stand by helplessly and watch. And the judgment would come from the heavens.

While no mention is made of the Nile this seventh warning is to be given early in the morning. This links this opening plague of the third series with the opening plagues of the first two series and evidences the unity of the narrative (7.15; 8.20).

- a Early in the morning Moses is to stand before Pharaoh and tell him that Yahweh says, 'Let my people go that they may serve Me.' (13)
- b If he does not then his very heart will be affected, and his grand officials and his people so that he will know that there is none like Yahweh on earth, for he intends to send 'all my plagues' on them (14).
- c Let him remember that Yahweh could have put out His hand and smitten him and his people with pestilence, and he would have been cut off from the earth (15).
- d Indeed he has been raised up for this very purpose so as to reveal Yahweh's power, and so that His name might be declared throughout all the earth (16).
- e And yet he still exalts himself against Yahweh's people and will not let them go (17).
- f On the morrow Yahweh intends to cause hailstorms such as have never been before in Egypt since the world began (18).
- g And he warns him (and his people) that they must bring all their cattle, with themselves, into shelter, for the hailstorm will be such that all out in the open will die (19).
- h Those who feared Yahweh among Pharaoh's officials brought their beasts and their servants indoors (20).
- h Those who did not regard Yahweh left them in the open field (21).
- g Yahweh tells Moses to stretch forth his hand towards heaven so that there would be hailstorms throughout the land of Egypt on both man and beast out in the open (22).
- f And Moses did so and there was thunder and hail, and lightning striking and running along the ground, hail and fire mingled with hail, very grievous such as had not been in Egypt since they were a nation (23-24).
- e And the hail smote all that was outside in the open throughout the land of Egypt, man and beast, vegetation and trees, only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail (25-26).
- d Pharaoh calls for Moses and Aaron and admits that he has erred, that Yahweh is righteous and that his people are wicked. He has had enough. Let them entreat Yahweh that there be no more of this thundering and hail and he will let them go and they need

remain no longer (28).

- c Moses declares that once he has left the city he will spread out his hands before Yahweh and there will be no more thunder and hail so that Pharaoh will know that the earth is Yahweh's. Yet he knows that Pharaoh and his officials will not yet fear Yahweh God. And the flax and barley which were growing were smitten but the wheat and spelt which had not yet sprouted were untouched (31-32).
- b And Moses left the city and spread out his hands to Yahweh, and the thunders and hail ceased and the rain ceased pouring down. And when Pharaoh saw this he sinned even more and hardened his heart, he and his officials (33-34).
- a And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, nor would he let the children of Israel go, as Yahweh had spoken by Moses.

Note the contrasts. In 'a' Yahweh calls on Pharaoh to let His people go, in the parallel Pharaoh refuses to do so. In 'b' if he does not let Yahweh's people go his 'heart' will be affected, and his officials and people, in the parallel Pharaoh hardened his heart and his officials did so also. In 'c' Yahweh could smite them with pestilence (which can include pestilence which affects crops and vegetation - see 1 Kings 8.37), and cut them off from the earth, in the parallel He will yet spare them by stopping the thunder and hail, but they still do not fear God, (and are still therefore liable to be cut off) while the barley and flax are smitten, although the wheat and spelt are spared, for He is still deferring final judgment. In 'd' Pharaoh has been raised up so as to reveal Yahweh's power and so that His name might be declared throughout all the earth, while in the parallel Pharaoh is seen as having admitted his error and failure to obey Yahweh along with all his people, and is yielding to His will. In 'e' he is still exalting himself against Yahweh's people while in the parallel Yahweh's people are spared while Egypt is punished. Yahweh is exalting Himself against Egypt. In 'f' Yahweh will send such hailstorms as have not been seen in Egypt since the world began, while in the parallel such hailstorms came, hailstorms such as had not been seen in Egypt since it was a nation. Two superlative ideas are compared. In 'g' Yahweh warns that all cattle must be brought into shelter while in the parallel all those not in shelter are to be subjected to the hailstorms. In 'h' we have the contrast between the Egyptians who feared Yahweh, heeded His words and kept their cattle in shelter, while in the parallel are those who did not do so.

9.13-14 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and stand before Pharaoh and say to him, Thus says Yahweh the God of the Hebrews. Let my people go that they may serve me. For I will this time send my plagues on your heart and on your servants and on your people that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.'

It is probably intended to be significant that Pharaoh no longer goes down to the Nile in the morning (compare 7.15; 8.20). He does not want to have any part of the insects and diseases that affect his land. But the forthcoming plagues were to affect him ('on your heart') as no previous plague has done.

Note that this is a new phase. Aaron now slips into the background, although still there to assist Moses (10.3, 8, 16), and from now on it is out and out confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. The contest is 'hotting up'.

'I will send my plagues.' God has in mind that there are a number of plagues yet to come. From this point of view we are to see these last plagues as together, for God and Moses know that Pharaoh will not listen and that the plagues are therefore inevitable (see verse 30).

'On your heart.' This might refer to the heart of Pharaoh as affected by what he saw around him and what was happening to his people (as the parallel might suggest with its mentioning of the hardening of his heart), or it may have in mind that Egypt was Pharaoh's 'heart'. What is said refers first to the fact that the devastation wrought will hit Egypt as nothing before has

done. It has been his heart, his innermost being, which has firmly resisted Yahweh and been hardened. Now it is to be severely attacked. It will be deeply affected (compare Psalm 107.12) by what is to come. First Egypt's very food supply and means of mummification (the flax) will be destroyed, and in a sense these are Pharaoh's heart. But his heart will be even more deeply affected when the locusts and the thick darkness blot out the sun, and the sun god Re is seen to be helpless, for he was closely connected with Re. But finally he will be most deeply affected of all when 'the firstborn of Pharaoh in the land of Egypt' dies. Then and only then will his heart yield.

'On your servants and on your people.' The difference between the high officials and bureaucrats and the common people continues to be emphasised.

'That you may know that there is none like me.' Once Yahweh has finished what He is doing, His uniqueness will stand out unreservedly. The gods of Egypt will have been proved to be powerless against Yahweh. Note how Moses refuses even to give them credence.

9.15-18 "For now I could have put out my hand and smitten you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth, but, indeed, this is the reason I have made you to stand in order to show you my power and so that my name may be declared through all the earth. Do you as yet exalt yourself against my people so that you will not let them go? Behold tomorrow, about this time, I will cause it to rain a very severe hail such as has not been in Egypt since the day it was founded even until now."

Yahweh points out that He is being merciful. Had He wished He could have destroyed both Pharaoh and his people totally with pestilence and disease. The word can also include pestilence on crops and vegetation (1 Kings 8.37). He had the power of life and death. But the reason He has not done so is in order to demonstrate His power so that the whole world may know of it. And now because Pharaoh still exalts himself He is about to send a great hail unlike anything seen before in Egypt since its very beginning which will destroy all men and beasts in the open field and all crops and vegetation.

'So that my name might be declared.' And this is so that His name, that is His very self, might be made manifest to the nations. The knowing and declaring of His name is a theme of the first part of Exodus (3.13-16; 5.2; 6.3, 7; 7.5, 17; 8.10; 9.14; 10.2). By what happened in Egypt He would get great glory. Even Pharaoh's repentance (verse 27), brief though it was, would bring great glory to his name, and his final repentance (and his turning back from it) even greater glory.

'Tomorrow, about this time.' This is to make Pharaoh realise that it comes at Yahweh's behest and under His control, and also to give an opportunity to anyone who will listen to protect what remains of the livestock.

9.19 "Now therefore send your instructions, hurriedly bring in your cattle and all that you have in the field, for on every man and beast who will be found in the field and will not be brought home, the hail will come down on them and they shall die."

The words were being spoken before Pharaoh's high officials. Both he and they could hear if they wished. And they had due warning. If they did not want their cattle and servants to die they must bring them to shelter. Now all were being faced up to the question as to whether they would believe the word of Yahweh.

9.20-21 'He who heard the word of Yahweh among the servants of Pharaoh made his servants and his cattle flee into the houses, and he who did not take any notice of the word of Yahweh left his servants and his cattle in the field.'

Yahweh was now seeking to sow dissension among the high officials in Egypt and making them take sides. Some took notice of His words and sheltered their servants and cattle, others ignored Him and did not do so, and it was to their cost. This was His prophetic and powerful word, the 'dabar Yahweh'. Some of those who heard it recognised that the very speaking of the divine 'word' would be effective in bringing it about and brought everything in to shelter. They recognised that word and action went together.

9.22-24 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand towards heaven that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, on man and on beast and on all vegetation throughout the land of Egypt." And Moses stretched out his staff towards heaven, and Yahweh sent thunder and hail, and lightning (fire) ran down to the earth. And Yahweh rained hail on the land of Egypt. So there was hail, and lightning mingled with hail, very severe, such as had not been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.'

It is now Moses himself who acts publicly and stretches out his staff towards heaven. Not the sky god is clearly powerless and Yahweh takes control. He sends down huge hail in a massive hailstorm accompanied by fierce lightning covering large parts of Egypt. Indeed it was so severe that Egypt as a nation had never known its like. It must have been awesome to behold.

9.25-26 'And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt all that was in the open countryside, both man and beast, and the hail smote all vegetation and broke every tree in the countryside. Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail.'

The devastation was clearly dreadful. The hailstones were so large that they killed both men and animals, and the vegetation, and especially the flax and barley which was ripening in the fields, was destroyed. Trees were pulverised and broken. Looking for parallels is clearly difficult for we are told that nothing like it had ever been seen before, but even in our own day huge hailstones have been known which could kill a man. What caused it geographically speaking we can only surmise but the very fact of the previous plagues demonstrates that the weather patterns at the time were unusually severe.

'Only in the land of Goshen --'. Severe though it might be, God was in control of the hail. His people, many of whom would have been required still to work in the fields, were safely delivered.

The storms would not necessarily hit everywhere at the same time. Places further afield from Pharaoh's palace would be hit later, possibly giving time for the warning that was given to Pharaoh's officials to reach them.

9.27 'And Pharaoh sent and called for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "This time I have sinned. Yahweh is righteous and I and the people are wicked. Entreat Yahweh, for there have been enough of these voices of God (or 'mighty thunderings') and hail, and I will let you go and you shall stay no longer.'

The dreadful devastation and awfulness of the storms fell on Pharaoh's heart (verse 14). He was deeply moved and for a short time conscious of sin and wrongdoing. He recognised that he and his people had been in the wrong in their treatment of the children of Israel. (Such flights of conscience sometimes strike the most evil of men). They could have been more reasonable and let them worship their God. But like most men he was unwilling to take all the blame on himself, and so he included his people who had suffered for his vanity.

'Pharaoh sent and called.' Previously it was 'Pharaoh called.' Possibly in mind is the advice in verse 19 to send a message for the cattle to be brought to shelter. He now 'sends', but he sends too late and for the wrong reason. Had he 'believed' and sent then, and acted in accordance

with that belief, many lives would have been saved. But now he has come to a form of belief and sends for Moses and Aaron. His call is not to be seen as peremptory.

'Yahweh is righteous and I and the people are wicked.' He accepts that Yahweh is in the right. All He had asked was the reasonable worship of His people. Thus Pharaoh admits that he was wrong for failing to allow it. But he sees the people of Egypt as incorporated in himself. They had after all agreed with his decision. Thus they must share joint responsibility.

'These voices of God.' In view of the context we cannot exclude this thought. It was not just the mighty thunderings Pharaoh was thinking of (which have not been previously mentioned), but the thunderings which spoke to him and his people as divine voices, as a mighty voice from Yahweh. They, and the devastation that accompanied them, had totally unnerved him.

9.29-30 'And Moses said to him, "As soon as I am gone from the city I will spread abroad my hands to Yahweh. The thunderings will cease, neither will there be any more hail, in order that you may know that the earth is Yahweh's. But as for you and your servants, I know that you will not fear Yahweh, God."

Moses was not deceived. He knew what was really in Pharaoh's heart. But he will stop the devastation because he knows that there is yet more to come. It is the final confrontation, and now directly between Moses and Pharaoh.

'As soon as I am gone from the city.' Moses and Aaron clearly did not live within the city. They appeared and disappeared to the great fear of the populace. They probably mainly lived among their own people. This may include the thought that while he is in the wicked city (for cities are regularly seen in the Old Testament as centres of wickedness) he will not act. He must be in God's clean air.

'The thunderings will cease.' To us the hail would have been more frightening, but to Pharaoh the thunderings were the voice of Yahweh and to be feared the most.

'I will spread abroad my hands.' Pharaoh was to know that Moses was in control.

'That you may know that the earth is Yahweh's.' Pharaoh needed to learn also that Yahweh was over all. That Moses acted under His authority and power.

'As for you and your servants.' Moses has in mind that the high officials were listening. They too needed to make up their minds.

'Yahweh, God.' He was drawing attention to the fact that the gods of Egypt had been powerless to help them. It is Yahweh Who is 'God'. (There is no definite article in Hebrew before God but the idea is clearly there that Yahweh is uniquely God).

9.31-32 'And the flax and the barley were smitten, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the spelt were not smitten for they had not begun to grow.'

This note demonstrates the writer's knowledge of Egyptian agriculture. The flax and barley always preceded the wheat and spelt. They were devastated by the storms and the hail. The flax was needed in providing the material for mummification and for the priests' garments. But this year there would be none. As is brought out in the analysis above this was the part of the partial pestilence which came as a warning of what could be (see verse 15).

'Spelt'. A wheat-like product. The wheat and the spelt had been spared, but only to await the locusts.

9.33 'And Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh, and spread abroad his hands to Yahweh, and the thunders and hail ceased and the rain was no longer poured on the earth.'

At Moses' visible plea to Yahweh (Pharaoh no doubt had his spies out) the dreadful storms and hail ceased throughout Egypt. We are now informed that there had been hail, lightning, thunder and dreadful rainstorms. But the hail was the most deadly and the constant thunder the most unnerving.

Perhaps Moses waited until he was out of the city because he suspected that otherwise Pharaoh planned to kill him, for he probably discerned that Pharaoh was in two minds, and in a state of extreme tension. Had he stayed in the city his life might well have been forfeit.

9.34-35 'And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased he sinned yet more, and hardened (made heavy) his heart, he and his servants. And the heart of Pharaoh was made strong and he did not let the children of Israel go just as Yahweh had spoken by Moses.'

Once more Pharaoh revealed his obstinacy and his contempt of his promises. He had admitted that he was in the wrong (9.27), and now he added to his wrong, 'he sinned yet more'. He broke his treaty with Yahweh. He hardened (made heavy) his heart. And this time the court officials were included. They too hardened their hearts. All were being given the opportunity to recognise and acknowledge Yahweh but with one accord they turned against Him. Their hearts could have been turned towards Him but instead they rejected Him. Pharaoh's heart has truly been affected (see verse 14).

There is a constant pattern to the final statements which follow each plague, even though there is a little variation. 'He did not listen to them as Yahweh had said' (7.13; 7.22; 8.15; 8.19), 'he did not let the people go' (8.32; 9.7), 'he did not listen to them as Yahweh had spoken to Moses' (9.12), 'he did not let the children of Israel go as Yahweh had spoken by Moses (9.35), 'he did not let the children of Israel go' (10.20), 'he would not let them go' (10.27), 'he would not let the children of Israel go' (11.10). The first four are 'did not listen to them', the last four are 'did not let them go (with variations)', separated by 'did not let them go' (twice) and 'did not listen to them'. It is thus emphasised that over and over again he did not listen, and that he did not let them go. He had been given every opportunity and had refused.

Compare also the very different pattern of the two different words translated 'harden' (meaning 'made strong' and 'heavy'). 'Pharaoh's heart was made strong' (7.13; 7.22), 'he made heavy his heart' (8.15), 'Pharaoh's heart was made strong (8.19), 'Pharaoh made heavy his heart' (8.32), 'Pharaoh's heart was heavy' (9.7), 'Yahweh made strong Pharaoh's heart' (9.12), 'he made heavy his heart' and 'Pharaoh's heart was made strong' (9.34-35), 'Yahweh made strong Pharaoh's heart' (10.20; 10.27; 11.10). Here the pattern alternates to begin with, reverses and alternates and then solidifies. Made strong (twice), made heavy, made strong, made heavy, was heavy, made strong, made heavy, made strong (four times). It is a totally different pattern, and his heart is made strong to resist Yahweh twice as much as it is made heavy.

Thus the two connected patterns do not fit together. They are two different patterns which are part of the whole weave, revealing unity of authorship.

Note that the 'making heavy' of the heart is never directly imputed to Yahweh, while the 'making strong' of the heart always is. ('Made strong Pharaoh's/his heart' also occurs in 7.3; 10.1 compare 4.21. 'Pharaoh's heart is heavy' in 7.14). Yahweh strengthens the hardening, He does not make it happen.

The Eighth Plague - The Plague of Locusts (10.1-20).

We note in this passage a distinct change of tone. No longer does Yahweh commence with the opening, 'let My people go' (compare 8.1; 9.1, 13). Instead He says 'I have made strong (hardened) his heart and the heart of his officials in order to show my signs among them'. The end was near and He no longer looked for Pharaoh's honest response. Yet He had also begun in the same way in 7.14, although there it was because Pharaoh had made strong ('hardened') his own heart. While Yahweh will still allow Moses and Aaron to make the call He recognises that the time for treaty is really past. Pharaoh has broken his word too often.

- a Yahweh tells Moses that he has hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and his officials in order that He might show His signs among them (1).
- b It is in order that Israel might teach its children what God had achieved against Egypt and the signs that He has revealed, that it might be known that He is Yahweh (2).
- c Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh in Yahweh's name and ask how long he refuses to humble himself before Yahweh and calls on him to let Yahweh's people go (3).
- d If he will not let them go locusts will be brought in who will cover the whole of the land and destroy all trees and vegetation and fill all their houses in a way that has not happened in living memory. Then Moses turned and went out from Pharaoh (4-6).
- e Pharaoh's officials plead with him to let the men go to serve Yahweh and ask Pharaoh if he realises how much the land has been subjected to destruction (6).
- f So reluctantly Pharaoh calls for Moses and Aaron who are brought before him, and he tells them that they may go and serve Yahweh, but asks who will go (8).
- g Moses replies that everyone must go including the cattle (9).
- g Pharaoh declares that he will not let all go, only the men (10-11a).
- f Angry at their response Pharaoh causes them to be driven from his presence (11b).
- e Yahweh tells Moses to stretch out his hand over the land of Egypt in order to bring the locusts down on it to eat whatever the hail has left (including the wheat and the spelt) (12).
- d Moses obeys Yahweh and an east wind brings in the locusts. The locusts arrive in huge numbers as never before or afterwards. They cover the face of the ground and eat everything that is left including the trees and vegetation (13-15).
- c Pharaoh calls for Moses and Aaron in haste and confesses that he has sinned against both Yahweh their God and Moses (thus he will let the people go). He asks forgiveness and that they will entreat that this living death might be moved from them (16-17).
- b Moses goes out from Pharaoh and entreats Yahweh and a west wind takes away the locusts so that none are left (thus making it known that He is Yahweh) (18-19).
- a Yahweh hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he will not let the children of Israel go (20).

In 'a' we have Yahweh's statement that He has hardened Pharaoh's heart and in the parallel the fact that He has hardened his heart. In 'b' Israel is to teach its children what God has wrought in Egypt and what signs He has revealed so that they may know that He is Yahweh, in the parallel He mightily removes the vast clouds of locusts in one day, thus revealing what He is to Pharaoh and Egypt. In 'c' Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh and ask how long he will refuse to humble himself before Yahweh and demand that he will let God's people go, in the parallel Pharaoh repents and humbles himself and admits that he has been in the wrong for not letting Israel go. In 'd' they declare that if he will not let the people go God will bring down on Egypt great clouds of locusts who will eat the trees and vegetation, in the parallel those locusts are brought down on Egypt and consume all that is left including the trees and vegetation. In 'e' Pharaoh's official draw Pharaoh's attention to how much Egypt has been devastated because of his intransigence and ask that he let the Israelites go, in the parallel Yahweh orders the completion of that devastation. In 'f' Pharaoh reluctantly appears to concede defeat but questions what they are wanting, in the parallel, having found out, he hits back and causes them to be driven from his presence. In 'g' Moses demands that

everyone may go including the cattle, and in the parallel Pharaoh declares that not everyone can go, only the men.

10.1-2 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have made strong his heart and the heart of his servants that I might show these my signs among them, and that you might tell in the ears of your son, and of your son's son, what things I have wrought on (how I have shown up) Egypt, and my signs which I have done among them, that you may know that I am Yahweh."'

The 'I' is emphatic. The end is approaching and Yahweh is making things work according to His plan.

The wonders wrought in Egypt had a number of purposes. They were not only intended to convince the Egyptians to finally send the children of Israel away, but also to strengthen the latter's faith for the future and give an understanding that Yahweh is the One Who is there to act. Note that the specific aim is that these stories might be passed down to future generations, and be recited in their ears, not just as stories but as theological statements. And to someone who was used to recording things in writing (Exodus 17.14; 24.4-8; 34.27; Numbers 33.1-2; Deuteronomy 31.9) such a command must surely have issued in the same result. Moses would put everything important down in writing!

'These my signs among them.' His wonders were 'signs'. They were intended to convince and give understanding. From them the Egyptians should have come to faith in Yahweh. And for a time some did, for they took their cattle inside to shelter from the hail (9.20). But once the worst was over they soon forgot and convinced themselves that maybe their gods had won after all. From them too the children of Israel yet to come were to know the significance of the name of Yahweh, to 'know that I am Yahweh'.

We probably do not sufficiently appreciate the subservience of a nation that has been enslaved for a long time. They had lost their spirit and had little resistance. When Moses had arrived they had seen the signs that Yahweh had given him and their hearts had been uplifted. But as soon as Pharaoh proved obstinate they had been like sheep and their resistance had collapsed and all they had been able to do was blame Moses. Indeed part of the purpose of the plagues was probably in order to stiffen their confidence in what Yahweh could do, and to teach them to rise above their problems, so that when they found themselves in the wilderness they would have some courage which would come from their confidence in Yahweh. And as we know that constantly failed, so much so that when eventually they arrived at the borders of the land their courage collapsed altogether and they failed to make their entry.

'I have wrought on.' The hithpael of 'alal means 'to make sport of, make a fool of, show up'. Here Yahweh's intent is deadly serious. It is not in order to mock but in order to show up. His intent was to reveal them and their gods for what they are.

Note again that Pharaoh's high officials are now being included (compare 9.34), although there were clearly some who had reservations (9.20) as the sequel brings out. This suggests that it was now seen to be an emergency situation, and the counsellors were regularly being called in and on almost constant alert. Pharaoh was no longer as confident as he had been.

10.3 'And Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh and said to him, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews. How long will you refuse to humble yourselves before me? Let my people go that they may serve me."'

Note that Yahweh no longer tells them to do this. But they still make the same request, that they may be allowed to worship Yahweh in the wilderness. The diplomatic show has to go on.

However, the battle has produced in Pharaoh a total feeling of intransigence. To yield now would be to admit Yahweh's superiority over himself and the gods of Egypt. And that is indeed what Yahweh now demands. 'You refuse to humble yourselves before me'. The Egyptians may not learn the lesson but the children of Israel would never forget it. It would be with them in their memories and in their Psalms for ever. They knew now that their God was over all.

10.4-6a "Or else, if you refuse to let my people go, behold tomorrow I will bring locusts into your border, and they will cover the face (the word is usually rendered 'eye') of the earth (or 'land') so that one will not be able to see the earth (or 'land'), and they will eat the residue of what has escaped, what remains to you from the hail, and will eat every tree which grows for you out of the countryside. And your houses will be filled, and the houses of all your servants, and the houses of all the Egyptians as neither your fathers, nor your fathers' fathers, have seen since the day that they were on the earth up to this day."

The next promise is the coming of a vast cloud of locusts. Locusts were brought on the wind and were not common in Egypt, but they had had enough experience of them to be afraid (10.7). The locust was primarily a destroyer, although it could also be a useful source of protein (Leviticus 11.22), especially among desert tribes. Their coming was regularly seen as God's judgment (Deuteronomy 28.38, 42; Joel 1.4).

The female lays its eggs just below the surface of the soil where they may stay for many months until moisture allows them to hatch. Once the eggs hatch the locust has the general shape of an adult locust but is without wings which it takes five to six months to acquire. They are wholly vegetarian and in large numbers cause massive devastation, eating everything in the fields and stripping the trees bare. The weather conditions elsewhere, which we know to have been a reality because of the excessive inundation of the Nile, would cause them to breed in vast numbers, awaiting the wind which would carry them into Egypt. And when they came in large numbers they would appear like a vast cloud, darkening the sky, and wherever they settled they would denude the vegetation, and then attack the trees. No vegetation would be safe. All would be denuded or eaten.

'They will cover the face of the earth (or 'land').' The word for face is one mostly translated 'eye'. The word for earth is 'erets which can mean the earth, or the land. Thus 'the face of the earth' may therefore signify the sun (compare also 10.15 where covering it results in darkening) as the 'eye of the earth'. There are frequent references in Egyptian literature to 'the eye of Re', the sun god. Thus would Re be restricted and hidden from what Yahweh was doing. Their main protection (from the point of view of the Egyptians) would be useless, for he was being blinded by Yahweh. Or the point may be that the earth itself is 'blinded' by the multitude of locusts, and thus unable to perform its functions. Alternately we may translate 'land' and intend it to mean that the whole face of the land will be covered with them.

'And your houses will be filled.' No one would escape. Pharaoh, his high officials and his people would find their houses filled with them. They would be inundated. They would be in such vast numbers that locusts would be everywhere. Experience would demonstrate that, even when they tried to eat, a locust would be on their food, there to eat it before them. The suggestion may be, although it is not stated, that the children of Israel will not be included, for their houses are not mentioned.

There would be an unusually large number of locusts such that the like had not been known over three generations (but not as unusual as the hail, of which the like of had not been seen since before the nation was founded - 9.24).

10.6b "And he turned and went out from Pharaoh."

(Compare 7.23). Previously it has simply been 'went out from Pharaoh'. Now Moses has been emboldened and is aware of his power. He wants Pharaoh to realise that he is in control. 'He turned'. This time he does not pay Pharaoh the deference that Pharaoh usually demands and his subjects usually give. He openly and irreverently turns on his heel and stalks out. This is not the way Pharaoh is used to being treated. But Pharaoh is afraid of him. He has seen what he can do. So he lets him go. What supreme courage Moses had, for in the end he bore his burden alone, before that mighty array of powerful Egyptian aristocrats and priests. And no one knew more than he did what they had the power to do. Aaron no doubt discreetly followed him.

10.7 'And Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the men go that they may serve Yahweh their God. Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?"

But the mighty array were more afraid of Moses than he was of them. They advised that Pharaoh give in. This was not direct criticism of Pharaoh. That was something that they would not have dared to attempt. No doubt Pharaoh called a meeting to discuss the situation and to seek advice, and so they gave it. His advisers came up with a compromise solution. Let Pharaoh agree to let *the men* go to serve Yahweh their God. But there is no doubt that they were uneasy for they asked Pharaoh, safe in his palace, whether he was really aware of the devastations that had struck Egypt. Did he realise what the situation now was? Egypt had been almost destroyed. They had still had the wheat and spelt, but now this plague of locusts could signal the end. Their last and final crops could be devastated.

10.8 'And Moses and Aaron were brought again to Pharaoh, and he said to them, "Go, serve Yahweh your God. But who are they who will go?"

So Moses and Aaron were recalled in accordance with the counsellors' advice. They were told that they could go and serve Yahweh, but first he wanted to determine as to who exactly would go.

10.9 'And Moses said, "We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters, we will go with our flocks and our herds, for we must hold a feast to Yahweh."

Moses reply was not unreasonable. It was to be a wholehearted worship of Yahweh and everyone must be involved, both young and old. It would be a time of sacrifices and offerings and a time of feasting and gladness before Yahweh, thus they would also need their flocks and herds with them in order to provide the wherewithal.

In fact the Egyptians used to welcome their children to their feasts so that that aspect of things would not have been seen as unreasonable, except to Pharaoh in his present mood.

10.10-11 'And he said to them, "May Yahweh so be with you if I let you go with your little ones. Look at what you are proposing (literally 'look at it'), for your intent is evil ('evil is before your face'). It shall not be so. Go now, you who are adult men, and serve Yahweh, for that is what you want." And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.'

Pharaoh refused to countenance their suggestion and put forward the worked out compromise. The adult men could go to serve Yahweh in the wilderness (compare 23.17; 34.23; Deuteronomy 16.16 - normally this would have been acceptable), but only them. He was now deeply suspicious that they had some evil purpose and he wanted hostages. Perhaps, he thought, there were plans to meet up with some enemy so as to attack Egypt while it was so devastatingly weakened, as the Hyksos had done previously. He probably did not fear that they would leave entirely for he knew that the Egyptian army could easily prevent it.

'May Yahweh so be with you.' An ironical comment. Did they really think that he would let Yahweh go with them like that? If he let them all go he would be giving Yahweh sole charge and renouncing his own authority, an unlikely scenario.

'They were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.' Having spoken his last word they were driven from his presence. Pharaoh was not going to allow Moses to humiliate him again by turning round and once more walking out. So they were hustled out by soldiers. But Pharaoh was careful. He was still wary of what Moses could do. Things were definitely tense.

Why then did Pharaoh not have Moses immediately killed or arrested? The answer would seem to lie in superstitious dread. He knew that this being, whatever he was, had done such amazing things that who knew what might happen if he were physically attacked? It was something he dared not risk. And such would be the awe in which Moses was held that it is doubtful if Pharaoh could have found anyone to take on the job. Moses had truly become as a god to Pharaoh.

10.12-15 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, that they may come on the land of Egypt and eat all the vegetation in the land, even all that the hail has left." And Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and Yahweh brought an east wind on 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 borders of Egypt. They were in huge numbers ('very grievous'), before them there was no such a swarm of locusts as they, nor after them will be such, for they covered the face (or 'eye') of the whole earth so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the vegetation on the land, and all the fruit of the trees, whatever the hail had left, and there did not remain any green thing, either tree or vegetation through all the land of Egypt.'

Again it was the hand of Moses as he stretched out his staff that was seen to produce the plague. The result was a continual east wind that gradually, unknown at first to the Egyptians who did not know of the threat to the south of them, brought the huge numbers of locusts down to Egypt overnight. Locusts required a wind if they were to travel far. And their numbers were so vast, more than ever known before, that it would need a continual wind, and when they came the whole of Egypt was affected. As they came in like a great cloud in the sky, the sun was hidden, the land was darkened, everything was covered with them and they began to eat all the greenery that remained after the hail.

People who have seen clouds of locust in modern days have described how they look like a huge, black, threatening storm cloud in the distance until at last they come closer and it is apparent that the cloud consists of locusts. And then they arrive and the whole land is covered with them. But this was exceptional even compared with that. There were untold numbers of them.

All the vegetation and trees that remained were devoured and this probably included the now growing wheat and spelt. The economy of Egypt which had been devastated was now being totally ruined. And all because of Pharaoh's obstinacy.

'They covered the 'ayin of the whole earth so that the land was darkened.' 'ayin usually means 'eye'. It is therefore probable that this refers to the sun as 'the eye of Re'. It was that that was hidden by the vast numbers of the locusts, darkening the land. Re had to stand by and do nothing. Or it may refer to the fact that once the locusts had landed the earth became dark because of the colour of their bodies. What a sight that would have been. The whole of the land darkened by one mass of locusts wherever the eye looked

'There remained not any green thing.' The land was totally bare. Such denuding of the land by

locusts is terrible to see. One Pharaoh of the XIIth dynasty, Amenemhet, classed a plague of locusts as a calamity similar to a civil war, or to famine resulting from the failure of the Nile, and that was an ordinary one. The god Senehem is pictured in ancient Egypt as a locust, but he has clearly no control here.

10.16-17 'Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron in haste, and he said, "I have sinned against Yahweh your God and against you. Now therefore, I beg you, forgive my sin only this once and entreat Yahweh your God that he may take away from me this death only."

The final devastation, made even more apparent by the presence of locusts in the palace and the darkening of the sun, brought Pharaoh temporarily to his senses. Moses and Aaron had asked how long it would be before he humbled himself (10.3). Now he did humble himself (compare verse 3) and admit his guilt before Yahweh and before Moses (Moses has become as a god to Pharaoh - 7.1). But it was only to be temporary as such conversions often are. No mention is made of the release of the children of Israel to serve Yahweh in the wilderness at this point, but it is assumed in the admission of guilt. For this was the reason for his guilt, that he had not let them go to serve Yahweh.

'Take away from me this death only.' This could refer to the death that would result from the famine which would result from the activity of the locusts, or it may refer to the darkening of the sun seen as the temporary death of Re. Pharaoh, as the living god Horus, and prospective Osiris, was vitally connected with the sun god Re. Re's death would be his death.

10.18-20 'And he went out from Pharaoh and entreated Yahweh, and Yahweh turned a very strong sea wind which took up the locusts and drove them into the sea of reeds. There remained not one locust in all the border of Egypt. But Yahweh made strong Pharaoh's heart and he did not let the children of Israel go.'

'He went out from Pharaoh.' This time Moses did not turn and stalk out, nor was he thrust out. He recognised Pharaoh's submission. This was no time for putting on a display of anger. He was prepared to be courteous when courtesy was deserved. It is never godly to be rude.

On Moses' entreaty Yahweh sent a strong sea wind which drove the locusts into the sea of reeds granting complete deliverance. Not one was left in Egypt. But once this had happened Pharaoh again changed his mind. He refused to let them go to worship Yahweh. However, it is again made clear that he was not frustrating Yahweh. His refusal was all in God's plan. It was Yahweh Who was making his heart so strong.

'Sea wind.' This might be a 'west wind' as compared with the previous east wind (verse 13), for the west was then indicated by the Great Sea which lay to the west. Thus the same word can mean 'west' or 'sea'.

The Ninth Plague - The Plague of Thick Darkness (10.21-29).

As with the third and sixth plagues this one comes without introduction or warning, like a second hammer blow following a first or like a left followed by a right in boxing.

- a Yahweh tells Moses to stretch out his hand towards heaven so that there will be darkness over the whole land of Egypt, a darkness which may be felt (21).
- b Moses did as he was bid and there was thick darkness over Egypt for three days so that they could not leave their homes, nor could they see one another, although the children of Israel had light in their dwellings (22-23).
- c Pharaoh calls Moses and says that they may go with their little ones but must leave their cattle behind (24).

- **d** Moses replies that he must let them also have their cattle for they will need sacrifices and whole burnt offerings, for their sacrifices to Yahweh (25).
- **d** 'Not a hoof' would be left behind, for they will not know the details of what they require until they have arrived at their destination (25-26).
- **c** But in the end Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let them go (27).
- **b** Pharaoh tells him to leave him and ensure that he (Moses) sees his face no more, for in the day that Moses sees his face he will die (28).
- **a** Moses replies that he has spoken well, 'You will see my face no more' (29).

The contrasts are striking. In 'a' total darkness is promised (so that none can see anyone's face) and in the parallel Moses confirms that Pharaoh will not see his face again. This comparison is confirmed in 'b' for there it is specifically stated that one man would not be able to see another in the thick darkness, while in the parallel Pharaoh ironically tells Moses that he will not be allowed to see his face again. In 'c' Pharaoh gives reluctant half-permission, and in the parallel he will not let them go. His intransigence is being drawn out. In 'd' Israel must have their cattle for purposes of sacrifice, and in the parallel not a hoof will be left behind.

10.21 'And Yahweh said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand towards heaven that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness that may be felt (literally 'that one may feel darkness')." '

Pharaoh had seen what Yahweh had done to Re in the previous plague, which had affected him deeply, and now He struck again, this time without warning. The sun was blotted out and the land was in total darkness. This was not ordinary darkness. It was probably caused by an unusually heavy and severe khamsin dust storm resulting from a fierce hot wind from the desert containing within it an immense number of particles of sand, exacerbated by the large amounts of the red earth which had been deposited by the Nile which would have dried out as a fine dust, and would be lying on the ground. Thus the khamsin resulted in it blowing across the land. The khamsin wind would stir all this up making the air unusually thick and dark even for a khamsin, and blotting out the light of the sun. Approximately three days is the known length of a khamsin (10.23). This, coming on top of all that had come before, and seeming again to affect the sun god himself would have a devastating effect. Pharaoh was indeed being attacked at his heart (9.14). And the land would be brought to a total standstill.

'Darkness that may be felt.' The sand and dust made it something which men felt as well as experienced. During the storm nothing could be done. The dust forced its way into their houses (they had little protection for their windows). All men could do was shelter as best they may and wait for it to pass.

10.22-23 'And Moses stretched out his hand towards heaven, and there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. They did not see one another, nor did any rise from his place for three days. But all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.'

Previously Moses had stretched out his staff (9.23; 10.13), now he merely stretched out his hand. It was the hand of Yahweh. He was growing in confidence and trust and no longer needed visible supports. And the result was a khamsin dust storm more severe than anything in living memory, for it covered the whole of Egypt. To be caught in such a severe dust storm in the desert is to be rendered immobile. Those so caught often cannot see beyond their noses, and are helpless except to protect their camels, their noses, their eyes and their bodies from the storm, and wait crouched and immobile until the storm has passed, which usually takes three days. Being in Egypt (which was mainly desert, rendered even more dusty by the red dust that had come down on the Nile) they were able to take shelter in their homes, but the khamsin found its way in and they were unable to see each other, and simply lay without moving until it had passed.

'Thick darkness.' Literally thick with the sand and the dust. It swirled everywhere and there was no escaping it. It could not be kept out. And the land would be totally dark and the people would undoubtedly envisage evil spirits at work causing illness and death.

'For three days'. Khamsins regularly lasted for three or four days. Three is the number of completeness. The Egyptians were trapped wherever the storm had found them and were unable to socialise outside the home or have contact with each other. Life stood still. Time stood still. But Goshen escaped the worst of the storm and the children of Israel were hardly affected. There was light in their houses. The sun still shone on them. They were not in darkness, in either way.

10.24 **'And Pharaoh called to Moses and said, "Go yourselves, serve Yahweh, only let your flocks and your herds be kept behind. Let your little ones go with you."**

Pharaoh now made a further concession. He was fighting desperately for his pride. All the people may go to worship Yahweh, but they must leave their flocks and herds behind. He knew that they would be reluctant to lose them and that without them they could not survive for long. They would have to come back. This suggests that by this stage he was suspecting that they were hoping to depart for good.

Or it may be that he feared that they intended to join with some unknown enemy hiding in the wilderness, and thought that if they had left their cattle behind they would think twice about participating in such a venture. For they could then lose all their wealth. This incidentally draws our attention to the fact that in their 'slavery' they owned much cattle. Certainly they had to endure arduous forced labour on Pharaoh's building works, but they had a certain amount of freedom and independence.

That it was Moses' hope that they would leave permanently is clear. But that does not mean that it was his direct intention. He was simply doing what Yahweh had told him, and that was to go into the wilderness with the whole people of Israel and offer sacrifices. He was leaving in God's hands what would follow. (For he knew only too well that if they tried to escape, the Egyptian army would be able to force them back. But he simply trusted God to sort the situation out).

10.25-26 **'And Moses said, "You must also give into our hand sacrifices and burnt offerings that we may sacrifice to Yahweh our God. Our cattle also will go with us. Not a hoof will be left behind. For from them we must take what is needed to serve Yahweh our God, and we do not know what we must serve Yahweh with until we arrive there."**

Moses now insisted that Pharaoh's offer was not good enough. Their cattle and flocks must go with them. There could be no compromise. They would need sacrifices and whole burnt offerings, and until they arrived they would not know what Yahweh would demand. The 'sacrifices' would be partly consumed on the altar and partly shared among the worshippers, so that many would be required for the feast. And the 'whole burnt offerings' ('that which goes up') would be totally burned up.

'You must also give into our hands --.' This may be a demand that Pharaoh also now provide further means of sacrifice. But it was more probably simply a recognition that what they had 'belonged' to Pharaoh and he must let them take it with them.

10.27-28 **'But Yahweh made Pharaoh's heart strong and he would not let them go. And Pharaoh said to him, "Get yourself from me, see to your own safety, do not come before me (see my face) again, for in the day that you come before me (see my face) again you will die."**

Patience was running out on both sides. Pharaoh felt cornered and he did not like it. He had had enough. He would yield no further. Total surrender was too humiliating and unbecoming to a Pharaoh, so he warned Moses that if he ever came to see him again he would have him put to death. 'See my face no more.' The statement is intended to be ironic as the analysis above confirms. In the khamsin no one had been able to see anyone else's face. He wanted it to be known that Yahweh was not the only one who could prevent men seeing the faces of others. As far as he was concerned this was the end of any negotiation. Permission to worship Yahweh in the wilderness was now strictly denied. Let Moses be gone, and let Yahweh do what He will.

10.29 'And Moses said, "You have spoken well. You will see my face no more."

Moses equally ironically confirms that Pharaoh also will not see his face again. The repetition brings home the illustration. Pharaoh is in his own thick darkness, and there is therefore nothing ahead for him but tragedy. Indeed circumstance will be such that he will soon wish to see Moses' face.

It should be noted that at this point there is a deliberate insertion of text (although certainly by the original author for it fits in to both literary chiasmic constructions). For Moses does not leave after his words in verse 29. His diatribe continues in 11.4-8.

In the behaviour of Pharaoh we have a picture of the behaviour of the world in its obstinacy against God. Like Pharaoh man will not yield to God's approach. He may make a pretence of submission but his heart is hardened and when it comes to the crunch he stands up for his own 'rights'. He refuses to obey the voice of God. Thus does he bring himself into judgment.

The Tenth Plague - The Slaying of the Firstborn (11.1-12.36).

This whole section is constructed on an interesting chiasmic pattern:

- a Israel are to ask the Egyptians for gold and jewellery, etc (11.1-3).
- b All the firstborn in Egypt are to die - there will be a great cry throughout the land - Israel will be told to go (11.4-10).
- c The preparation of the lamb - the sacrifice - the blood on the doorpost it - will be a memorial for ever (12.1-14).
- d For seven days they are to eat unleavened bread - their houses to be emptied of leaven - the observation of the feast (12.15-17).
- d The observation of the feast of unleavened bread for seven days - their houses to be emptied of leaven (12.18-20).
- c The preparation of the lamb - the sacrifice - the blood on the doorpost - to be observed as an ordinance for ever (12.21-28).
- b The firstborn in Egypt die - there is a great cry in Egypt - the children of Israel are told to go (12.29-34).
- a Israel ask the Egyptians for gold and jewellery etc. (12.35-36).

There can be no doubt that this skilful arrangement is deliberate.

Yahweh's Deliverance About To Take Place. They Are to Ask the Egyptians for Gold and Jewellery (10.29-11.3)

10.29 'And Moses said, "You have spoken well. You will see my face no more."

This verse belongs to the last passage but we introduce with it here again so as to maintain the continuity.

The words of Pharaoh would have struck fear into many a heart. But Moses was now too strong. He was no longer afraid of Pharaoh, for he knew that something was about to happen that would shake both Pharaoh (and the whole of Egypt) to the very core of his being, to his heart (9.14), and he was very angry. Furthermore he alone on earth knew what was about to happen. What God had promised from the very beginning was about to come about because Pharaoh had refused to release God's firstborn son in order that they may worship Him (4.23). Now Pharaoh's own firstborn would be smitten.

'You have spoken well.' Moses wanted Pharaoh to know that he had spoken better than he knew. This would indeed be their last meeting until a broken Pharaoh called for him to tell them to go. Little did Pharaoh know what the consequence of his rejection was going to be. It would hit at the very heart of Egyptian life, at the heart of every family, and equally at Pharaoh's very heart as well.

But Moses did not as yet leave, for he had more to say. 11.1-3 is simply an interlude explaining why Moses now had such confidence in the face of what must have seemed a great disappointment. It tells us that Yahweh had shown Moses that this was finally to be the last of the plagues, that soon all would be over, and what the consequences were going to be for the children of Israel as far as wealth was concerned. And it declared what the status was that Moses now had in Egypt, not just as a prince but as having divine powers. This being in Moses' mind the conversation would continue. It was an assurance to him and to Israel at what must have seemed their darkest moment of the certain victory that was to be theirs. They were about to leave Egypt burdened with riches. We are justified in seeing it as expressing the thoughts which were buoying him up as he faced Pharaoh,

The Command To Spoil the Egyptians (11.1-3).

11.1-3 'And Yahweh had said to Moses, "I will bring yet one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt, afterwards he will let you go from here. When he lets you go he will surely thrust you out from here altogether. Speak in the ears of the people and let them ask every man of his neighbour and every woman of her neighbour, jewels of silver and jewels of gold. And Yahweh gave the people favour in the eyes of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people.'

We can analyse this as follows:

- a One more plague is to be brought on Egypt and on Pharaoh, and afterwards he will let Moses and Israel go (1a).
- b Afterwards he will certainly let them go, indeed will thrust them out altogether (1b).
- c Thus they are to speak in the ears of the people and ask for jewels of silver and jewels of gold as offerings to Yahweh (2).
- b And when they did so Yahweh gave them great favour in the eyes of the Egyptians (3a).
- a Moreover Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of the aristocratic leadership, and in the sight of the people (3b).

Note the parallels which unite the text. In 'a' one more devastating plague will achieve Yahweh's object through Moses, and in the parallel Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, admired by all but Pharaoh. Great in the eyes of all indeed to achieve this mighty object. In 'b' we have the promise that they will actually be thrust out by Pharaoh, and in the parallel that they had great favour in the eyes of the Egyptians. It is now great Pharaoh who stands alone. And central to all is that Yahweh's people will not crawl out of Egypt with their tails between their legs, nor will they flee leaving everything behind, they will go out loaded with wealth and spoils.

To those who know the story, these verses break into the dramatic confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. But they were necessary in order to demonstrate how Yahweh had prepared Moses for the final rejection by Pharaoh, how much alone Pharaoh now was in his opposition, and how Yahweh had fulfilled His own promises (3.19-22). To the writer far more important than the drama was the necessity to keep Yahweh and not Moses as pre-eminent.

It was important that Yahweh should be seen to be the victor. To us the receiving of wealth from the Egyptians may have seemed a secondary matter. To us what would have mattered was the freedom. But in those days the spoils went to the victor, and the writer was therefore careful to demonstrate that the children of Israel were to receive the spoils of victory. This had been emphasised in 3.19-22 when God was outlining what lay ahead. Now it is described in order to show that things had now reached their climax. Here was an indication that the victory of Yahweh was now certain, and the 'spoils of war' are given prominence. They had been told from the beginning that they would not have to flee like dogs with their tails between their legs, that they would leave as triumphant victors. Now this was to come to fulfilment. Thus the plagues come to their climax with this promise of glorious victory.

But we must not forget that Israel had been steadily impoverished by the Egyptians. They had had to work on their building projects and on their canals and irrigation systems for nothing except possibly food. Some of them had suffered terribly. Their own interests had had to be neglected. And they would be leaving behind their houses and any possessions that they could not take with them. It was therefore just that they now be reimbursed. This was not robbery. It was seeking just treatment.

And thirdly, it is brought out that Moses himself was to be vindicated, and restored to more than his former greatness. He had set aside greatness, and now no one on earth was greater than he.

'And Yahweh had said to Moses.' Hebrew verbs do not necessarily apply chronologically. They simply say that something happened, not when it happened. They had no way of representing the pluperfect. It had to be gathered from the sense. Here then we are being taken back to something Moses had been told before this 'final interview'.

'Yet one more plague.' From the beginning Yahweh had known what it would take to bring Pharaoh to his knees (4.23) and to such a state that he would finally seek to get rid of the children of Israel altogether once and for all. For this was always His plan (see 3.19-22). Now Moses could know that the end had been reached. At last they would be sent away to freedom.

'Thrust you out from here.' The words are forceful. Pharaoh will be made to do what Yahweh wishes and he will do it forcefully. He will be glad to let them go.

'Speak now in the ears of the people --.' From the beginning Yahweh had promised that when the children of Israel received their freedom they would leave in triumph. They would receive the 'spoils of war'. But it was stressed that these would not have to be forced from the Egyptians they would be given freely. Such is the wonder of God's ways. They would ask for, and would receive, gold and silver jewels (compare 3.22), and these would be bestowed on them generously and given to them gladly, in order to encourage them to go. It was little recompense for all that they had suffered, but it was better than nothing and would ease their way in the future, as well as enabling them to furnish Yahweh's Dwellingplace.

The gifts came from both men and women. All would wear golden ornaments of one kind or another.

'And Yahweh gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians.' Just as He had said He

would from the beginning (3.21), He ensured that they were treated with favour. These slaves would now be treated as those who deserved great honour. Pharaoh still looked on them with a jaundiced eye, but his people would see them otherwise. Whether the gifts were to appease this dreadful God Who did such things, or whether they were given in friendship, or whether they were given in gratitude because they had heard of what was happening elsewhere and recognised that they had been saved the worst because they lived among the Israelites in Goshen, or whether they hoped that by giving the gifts they would win favour with Yahweh, does not matter. The motives were probably varied. But the point is being made that they freely gave, and loaded God's people with wealth.

'Moreover the man Moses was very great --'. Moses, who had once been a prince of Egypt and had then slipped to being a tribal princeling, had now become more than a prince, he had become like a divinity (7.1), both to the high officials of the land and to the Egyptians and to Pharaoh. He who had once said, "Who am I?" (3.11) was now in a position of the highest honour. So Yahweh's triumph is complete. Note the contrast, 'the man Moses'. (This in contrast to the god Pharaoh). We are being reminded that he is only a man. 'Was very great --'. That was how the Egyptians saw him, as one of the great ones. This was not in order to boost Moses, it was in order to boost Yahweh who had made him seem so great in their eyes. And that is a further reason why the Egyptians gave so generously and abundantly.

This mixture of humility and yet recognition in wonder of what Yahweh had of made him smacks of Moses having written it in own words. Who else would have insisted that he was but the man Moses?

And at this point we now renew the meeting with Pharaoh following Moses' words, 'You will not see my face again' (10.29)

Moses Declares That All The Firstborn In Egypt Will Die And Stalks Out (11.4-10).

- a Yahweh says that He will go out into the land of Egypt (4).
- b As a result all the firstborn of Egypt will die from highest to lowest (5).
- c There will be a great cry throughout Egypt such as there has never been nor will be again (6).
- b But against any of the children of Israel not even a dog whet his tongue because Yahweh makes a difference between them and the Egyptians (7)
- a And Moses tells Pharaoh, "All your great grandees will come and bow down to me and say, 'Get out and all the people who follow you'. And after that I will go out." And Moses left Pharaoh's presence abruptly in hot anger.

Note again the contrasts thrown up by the sequence. In 'a' Yahweh will go majestically out into the land of Egypt, while in parallel a cringing Pharaoh will see all his grandees bowing to Moses, while Moses goes out in hot anger. In 'b' All the firstborn of Egypt will die from the house of Pharaoh to the house of the lowest of all, while in parallel Israel will be so untouched that not even a dog will lick them. And in the midst of all this will be the great cry that goes up throughout the land of Egypt.

11.4-7 'And Moses said, "Thus says Yahweh, about midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt, and all the firstborn from the land of Egypt will die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on the throne, even to the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the mill, and all the firstborn of cattle, and there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt such as none has been like it, nor shall be like it ever again. But against any of the children of Israel not a dog will whet his tongue against man or beast, that you may know that Yahweh makes a difference between the Egyptians (literally 'Egypt' as a people) and Israel." '

This is the first threat which has spoken of inescapable death. Previously death had been escapable but now it would be so no longer. It would be experienced by every family in Egypt. And it would take place during a night in the very near future. And Yahweh Himself would do it. And no one else would have any part in it.

'About midnight.' We must not think of this as being exact. No exact time was recorded in ancient days. Thus it means during the middle of the night. And each night, according to Egyptian teaching, the sun fought and killed the snake Apophis who symbolised the hostile darkness, so that the sun could shine again. But this night it would not be the sun, but it would be Yahweh Who would go forth and he would slay, not the snake Apophis, but all the firstborn of the land of Egypt, including the firstborn of the house of Pharaoh who was himself destined to become an incarnation of the sun. Everything would be turned upside down. The gods of Egypt would be put into disarray.

'All the firstborn.' These were those who were looked on as most favoured, those who were to be heads of families, those who were seen as most important of the future generation.

'The firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on the throne.' The most important of all was the future god Horus, son of Osiris, incarnated in the Pharaoh, although it is possible that Pharaoh's son was away fighting, and that it was therefore his son's son who would die. He too could be called the firstborn of Pharaoh for he was a firstborn in the house of Pharaoh. This would explain why there was no Egyptian record of a firstborn son of Pharaoh dying unusually. However it was the way of the Egyptians not to record anything that told against them. The least important would be the firstborn of the maidservant who was behind the mill. But all would die from highest to lowest.

'The maidservant who is behind the mill.' This is a typical Egyptian phrase not found outside Egypt and is describing the lowest of the low. Her job was to grind the grain daily with the mill, rubbing the top stone against the bottom. This was an arduous and unthankful task and to grind the grain was seen as the lowest occupation an Egyptian woman had to undertake, and was regularly reserved either for destitute women, slaves or for prisoners undergoing penal servitude (Judges 16.21; Isaiah 47.2).

'And all the firstborn of cattle.' Even the cattle would be affected.

'There will be a great cry --.' No day will ever have been like it. Every household would suffer bereavement. Every chief mother would lose a son. It would hit at the heart of Pharaoh and at the heart of Egypt. The whole of Egypt would be in mourning.

'Shall not a dog whet his tongue.' A proverbial expression, see Joshua 10.21. Not even a dog will threaten Israel or point his tongue at them.

'That you may know that Yahweh puts a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.' The whole point at issue has been the honouring of Yahweh as God of the whole earth. Those who honoured Him would be safe (and this would apply even if they were Egyptians if they followed His instructions), those who refused to honour Him would experience His judgment. Note the use of 'Israel'. What was happening was separating them off as a people. But the contrast was with 'Egypt' as representing the Egyptians. Thus Israel is an abbreviation here for 'the children of Israel'.

11.8 "And all these your servants will come down to me and bow themselves to me, saying, 'Get yourself out, and all the people who follow you'. And after that I will go out." And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger."

'All these your servants.' The scene is awesome. There in the throne room of Pharaoh Moses looked around at all the high officials in Pharaoh's court and indicated them. They were standing there horrified and angry and possibly a little apprehensive at the effrontery of Moses and totally subservient to Pharaoh. The last thing they had in mind was bowing to Moses. But he pointed out that despite themselves they would shortly 'come down', that is they would descend from their stately pride, and they would bow to him and would plead with him to leave Egypt along with all his people. And then, once they had done that, he would go.

We can imagine how they must have felt at that moment. They hated this man and what he had done to Egypt, but they were also terrified of him. For they had experienced what power he had. Yet they knew that Pharaoh had endured through it all and was still adamant, and they dared not oppose Pharaoh. What then could he possibly do to change Pharaoh's mind? And yet in their heart of hearts there must have been fear at some unknown that they could not conceive of which might yet strike Egypt. And it was because they were not sure what he could do, that they let him go.

'And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger.' It was not only Pharaoh who was angry (10.28). The contest was between equals. This was no longer the timid Moses. He was now equal to Pharaoh, no, even above him. And he was angry at all Pharaoh's duplicity. Pharaoh had constantly made promises and then reneged on them. His word could no longer be trusted. Furthermore Moses himself had suffered the humiliation earlier of being hustled out of Pharaoh's presence, no doubt with little ceremony. And that had been a humiliation for Yahweh too, for Moses was His ambassador. And so Moses strode out in hot anger without another word leaving Pharaoh bristling on his throne. But it was the righteous anger of Moses that would prevail.

A Final Summary of What Yahweh Has Done (11.9-10).

11.9-10 'And Yahweh had said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and Yahweh made Pharaoh's heart strong and he did not let the children of Israel go out of the land.'

These words summarise all that has gone before. They refer to what is past and indicate that the story is now coming to its climax. All that now remains is the final episode. The tension is mounting.

There is an indication here that Yahweh had given Egypt a unique opportunity. They had seen what He could do. They could have come to Him and sought Him. But they did not do so. Like Pharaoh their hearts were hardened. But in the end it was Yahweh Who had brought this about, so that with one last judgment He might obtain the release of His people. However much Pharaoh might have felt himself in control it was Yahweh Who had brought things to this stage in order that His great wonders might be revealed in a never to be forgotten way. For Yahweh had declared from the beginning that He would smite Pharaoh's firstborn because of his intransigence (4.23). And that is what happened.

Those who think that signs and wonders are the answer to bringing people to Christ should consider what happened here. There had been signs and wonders enough. But none had softened Pharaoh's heart or convinced most of the Egyptians. People convinced by signs and wonders soon turn away once the signs and wonders are forgotten. Even the final wonder that 'multiplied the wonders' for it affected so many would leave people distraught rather than believing.

Chapter 12 Instructions To Israel Concerning The Passover.

This chapter is partly historical, and partly explanatory. It splits into a number of sections. (1) Verses 1-14 contain the explanations given by Yahweh to Moses and Aaron with regard to the conducting of the first Passover. (2) Verses 15-20 connect the Passover with the Feast of Unleavened Bread to be observed at future times. (3) Verses 21-23 present Moses' explanations in abbreviated form to the elders for the conducting the first Passover. (4) Verses 24-28 explain the future way in which their children are to be taught of the Passover. (5) Verses 29-42 describe the actual occurrence of the Passover, the slaying of the firstborn, and the departure of the people. (6) Verses 43-51 conclude with further instructions for the Israelites regarding the celebration of the Passover in the future, and especially focus on the participation of foreigners who will dwell among them. But only the section from 1-36 is part of the Passover narrative., which is from 11.1-12.36.

Yahweh's Explanation to Moses and Aaron Concerning the First Passover (12.1-14).

Note that it is a direct address by Yahweh to Moses and Aaron to be passed on to His people.

- **a The moon period of Abib is from now on to be the beginning of months to them, the first moon period of the festal year (1-2).**
- **b On the tenth day of this month the head of the family is to take for each family a lamb/kid, one lamb/kid per household. If a household is too small to be able to eat a whole lamb/kid then two households may join together. The lamb/kid must be without blemish, a year old male, and either a sheep or a goat (3-5).**
- **c It shall be kept by each household until the fourteenth day of the moon period (around the full moon) and the whole of the gathering of Israel will each kill their lamb/kid between the two evenings (6).**
- **d And they shall take the blood and put it on the side posts and on the overhead lintel, on the houses in which they eat of it (7).**
- **e And they shall eat its flesh, roasted with fire, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They must not eat it raw, or sodden with water, but roasted with fire (8).**
- **e Its head and its legs and innards. They must let nothing of it remain until the morning, and what remains of it in the morning must be burned with fire (9-10).**
- **d And they will eat it with their loins girded, their shoes on their feet, their staff in their hand, and with haste. For it is Yahweh's Passover (11).**
- **c For Yahweh will go through the land of Egypt that night and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt. For He is Yahweh (12)..**
- **b And the blood will be a token on the houses where they are, and when Yahweh sees the blood He will pass over them, and no plague will come on them to destroy them, when He smites the land of Egypt (13).**
- **a And this day is to be a memorial and kept as a feast to Yahweh. Throughout their generations they will keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever (14).**

We note the parallels found in this solemn account. In 'a' the moon period of Abib is to be fixed for each year, and in the parallel the fourteenth day of that moon period is to be observed for ever. In 'b' the households gather and make ready a lamb/kid, and in the parallel those households are safe from Yahweh as He passes over and smites the land of Egypt. In 'c' the Passover lamb/kid is slain and in the parallel the firstborn of the land of Egypt are slain. In 'd' the blood is put as a token on the outside of the houses where they 'will eat it' and in the parallel the people 'will eat it' waiting to depart and fitted to leave on their journey in haste. In 'e' the provisions for eating it are described, and in the parallel the fact that all must be consumed.

12.1 'And Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt saying, "This month shall be to you the beginning of months, it shall be the first month of the year to you."

This is a turning point in the book. It was a moment of huge historical importance, for in this month Israel's deliverance was to be achieved. Thus there is the specific declaration of a new beginning. From this day on life was to be seen as having begun in this month because it was in it that their deliverance from Egypt, ready for their reception of their future inheritance, commenced. It was in fact the month of Abib (13.4), the month in which the feast of unleavened bread was celebrated (23.15). Later in Canaan they would celebrate the agricultural New Year in the Autumn because then the harvest was over and the new round of nature was to begin, but even so this probably continued to be the New Year religiously speaking, for it commenced the round of feasts that led finally up to Tabernacles. This was the official calendar. The other simply one observed because of the nature of things. It was only later that that would become official (they did not think in strict calendar terms as we do).

'In the land of Egypt.' It is specifically stressed that this passover feast with its unique emphasis was instituted in the land of Egypt. The connection with Egypt is stressed again in two passages which are specifically stated to have been written by Moses (Exodus 34.18 with 25 compare 23.15 with 18).

12.2-3 "You, speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, 'On the tenth day of this month they shall take for themselves every man a lamb (or kid) according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household be too small for a lamb, then shall he, and his neighbour next to his house, take one according to the number of people, according to what every man eats you will take your count for the lamb.' "

On the tenth day of the month of Abib every household was to take a lamb (or goat) and set it apart ready for the Passover.

This was not specifically said here to be for a sacrifice, although it is in verse 27. The purpose of the lamb was that it should be eaten. This is made abundantly clear. If the household could not fully eat it then two households could combine. But its 'holiness' is made clear in that it must all be eaten and any that is not eaten must be burned with fire (12.10). None must be left. And the putting of the blood on the doorpost (verse 7) in the light of its purpose (to prevent the smiting judgment of Yahweh - 12.23) suggests that it signifies some kind of substitutionary appeasement. The firstborn would not die because the blood was on the doorpost. Thus it clearly has a sacrificial element (verse 27; compare 34.25). The people would be protected by the blood and would hardly see it otherwise than as a sacrifice.

At this stage there was no priestly caste, and it is therefore probable that leaders of households acted as family priest. Thus each slaying would be made by the family priest. Certainly by the time of Jesus it had obtained sacrificial status for it had to be slain by the priests in the Temple.

'The congregation of Israel.' This is re-emphasising the unity of the children of Israel. They are one people, one gathering. The plea to Pharaoh had been that as a group they should be able to gather as a congregation in the wilderness to serve Yahweh. This was a phrase that would later represent the gathering of the whole people at a central sanctuary but it is not quite as fixed as that yet. Here it is rather those who are seen as being attached to 'the children of Israel' and represented by their leaders. It represents those who will gather to them when the time for departure comes. Those who, if the call came to sacrifice to Yahweh in the wilderness, would respond to that call. The identity of the group has been maintained as worshippers of Yahweh, and as accepting their connection with the people who entered Egypt with Israel (Jacob).

'According to their father' houses.' This indicates the lowest level of group. Each father has his household, and this is the group involved. Those who live in the one house are the members of that household. The father would be both patriarch and priest.

12.5 “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You shall take it from the sheep or from the goats.”

‘Without blemish.’ The lamb (or kid) was to be without blemish. This too emphasises the sacrificial element. It is separated to Yahweh and must therefore be ‘perfect’. It is a ritual without an official altar and without a sanctuary, but it is nevertheless holy to Yahweh.

‘A male of the first year (literally ‘son of a year’).’ This may mean one year old and therefore a grown lamb, or it may mean up to one year old.

12.6-7 “And you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, and the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it between the two evenings. And they shall take of the blood and put it on the two side posts and on the lintel in the houses in which they shall eat it.”

No indication is given as to why the lamb had to be kept for four days. It was possibly so as to give time to discover any blemish. Perhaps even tribal inspections of the lambs took place. Or it may be that its period of separation was seen as allowing a certain time for it to become ‘holy’, a separated lamb, set apart to God. (Compare how later after washing with water men would not be clean until a certain period had passed, ‘shall not be clean until the evening’). But at this first Passover it was probably also to give opportunity of all who would respond to become aware of the situation.

The blood of the lamb was to be put on the lintel and on the two doorposts. A number of festivals are known where blood was so applied to ward off evil spirits but there is no question of that here. This is a ceremony required by a benevolent Yahweh from His people and attracts his protection. The blood is there for *Him* to see. And He does not need to be warded off. Rather He wants to be satisfied that they have fulfilled His requirements. They have slain and eaten and therefore they will be spared. Even if this ceremony is based on some similar ceremony held in the past or known among other peoples its nature is being fundamentally changed. The applying of the blood to the doorposts and lintel may well have a somewhat similar purpose to the presenting of the blood at the altar. It indicates to Yahweh that the sacrifice has been made and applies the blood of the offering of the lamb.

‘The fourteenth day of Abib.’ Passover was held at the time of the full moon, fourteen days after the new moon which would commence the month. This would aid them in their journey.

‘The whole assembly of the congregation of Israel.’ Each household was to slay the lamb. This would almost certainly be done by the head of the household. All would see him as acting as a priest. At this stage as far as we know there was no official priesthood among the children of Israel and the father, the patriarchal figure, of the group or of the family would act as priest. But it is emphasised that each household offers as a part of the whole congregation.

‘Between the two evenings.’ This has to signify a period which is prior to the commencement of the new day (which began in the evening), as the sun was going down - see verse 18 and compare Deuteronomy 16.6, ‘at the going down of the sun’. As working slaves they would be released just prior to sunset. Compare Jeremiah 6.4, ‘the day declines, the shadows of the evening are stretched out’.

The passover celebration was to be both communal, for all would do it together, and individual, for each family unit would perform it. It had most of the elements of a sacrifice. An unblemished lamb, set apart as holy, solemnly killed by the priestly head of the household, partaken of by the household and the remainder burned with fire, with its blood applied before Yahweh (Who will specifically see it - verse 12.13, 23). It is specifically called a sacrifice

in 12.27. It was distinctive because of the nature of the circumstances which would ever be remembered.

12.8-10 “And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire and unleavened bread. They will eat it with bitter herbs. Do not eat of it raw, or sodden with water, but roast with fire, its head with its legs and with the inwards thereof. And you shall let nothing remain of it until the morning, but that which remains of it until the morning you shall burn with fire.”

The lamb was to be eaten roasted with fire, not raw or boiled with water. The roasting may have been for purposes of speed, compared with boiling. Among other peoples sacrificial flesh was often eaten raw with a view to absorbing the blood of the animal, its life-force. But it was not to be so here. The eating of the blood would later be strictly forbidden to Israel (Leviticus 7.26; 17.10) and clearly was so here. However, sacrificial flesh was certainly often boiled (Leviticus 6.28; Numbers 6.19). This is therefore a specific enactment. Deuteronomy 16.7 is sometimes cited as later allowing the boiling of the Passover lamb, but compare 2 Chronicles 35.13 where *bashal* is used for both roast and boil (it can also mean ‘bake’ - 2 Samuel 13.8). It is thus a general word for cooking.

‘Unleavened cakes.’ Quickly and easily cooked. There is continual emphasis in the passage on speed and readiness. Compare also 12.34 where it is stated that they did not have time to leaven their dough. In Deuteronomy 16.3 they are called ‘the bread of affliction’ because of their connection with the escape from Egypt.

‘Bitter herbs.’ The lives of the children of Israel had been made ‘bitter’ (1.14) and this symbolised the bitterness of their lives in Egypt. (Later, according to the Mishnah, these would be composed of lettuce, chicory, peppermint, snakeroot and dandelion).

Nothing was to be left of the meal. Whatever was uneaten was to be burned with fire. This would be because it was seen as a holy meal, set apart to God, and thus to be reserved only for use in the celebration. What remained was used as an offering to God. The whole of the sacrifice was thus seen as that night preparing them for their deliverance by sanctifying them (setting them apart as holy) in God’s eyes.

‘Its head and its legs with the inwards thereof.’ These were probably to be burned up and not eaten (compare Exodus 29.17; Leviticus 1.8-9, 12-13; 4.11; 8.20-21; 9.13-14).

12.11-13 “And this is the way you shall eat it, with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is Yahweh’s passover, for I will go through the land of Egypt in that night and will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments. I am Yahweh. And the blood will be for you a token on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood I will pass over you and there will be no plague on you to destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt.”

As they prepared the lamb and ate it they were to be dressed ready for a journey with staff in hand, and they were to eat in expectancy of soon leaving (‘in haste’). For during that night Yahweh was about to smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt.

The instructions about dress are not just as a symbol although they became that later on. The point is being made that the children of Israel must be ready for departure and that that departure will be hasty. They have only a few days to prepare for it and when the time comes they must be ready for it. It was a guarantee that their deliverance was coming.

‘Loins girded.’ Their robes tucked in so as not to impede the feet or get mud-ridden when walking. ‘Your shoes on your feet.’ Not left by the door as would be normal.

'It is Yahweh's passover (pesach).' The meaning of 'pasach' is not certain. However in Isaiah 31.5 it is used in comparison with birds flying over, and the thought is of protection by hovering or circling over. This fits admirably here. (It has also been connected with 'pasach' - 'to limp' (1 Kings 18.21, 26), and with Akkadian 'pasahu' - 'to be soothed'). It was 'a night of watching for Yahweh to bring them out of the land of Egypt' (12.42).

'Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments. I am Yahweh' The protection of the gods was constantly sought by the Egyptians, but those so-called gods will be unable to intervene, as they had been unable to intervene previously. Indeed they will be unable to save themselves and their proteges. The sacred animals that represent them will all face death in the family. Their priests will suffer the same fate. And a potential god will be smitten in the house of Pharaoh, for his heirs were destined to become gods. It was a night of judgment. So Yahweh, 'He Who is there to act', will act. He will make Himself known under His true name as the uniquely all-powerful.

It is noteworthy that Moses himself never mentions the gods of Egypt. He does not see himself as battling with them. Considering his background this is remarkable and demonstrates to what extent he sees Yahweh not only as the most powerful God but as the only God.

'A token.' A distinguishing mark, a sign which Yahweh will see to bring to mind a covenant obligation (Genesis 9.12), so that they will enjoy His protection and escape judgment. The blood signified that the necessary sacrifice had been made. It also meant that the firstborn within the house was looked on as Yahweh's, doomed for slaughter, but because of the blood of the sacrifice 'redeemed' and was thus now Yahweh's (13.1, 13). The lamb meanwhile had taken the place of the firstborn and had been willingly offered as a sufficient representative and substitute. And all had partaken in it thus sharing in its efficacy. As a result they were protected under the covenant.

12.14 'And this day shall be to you for a memorial, and you will keep it as a feast to Yahweh, throughout your generations you will keep it as a feast by an ordinance for ever.'

From this time on 'for ever' the Passover must be celebrated yearly as a reminder of and participation in this first feast and the deliverance it portended. It is still kept when we meet to celebrate the greater Passover of our Lord Jesus Christ.

'This day.' The fifteenth of Abib when the Passover was eaten and the firstborn of Israel were spared, and the children of Israel began their departure from the land. The day began in the evening and the Passover was therefore eaten on the first 'day' of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

'A memorial.' Something to bring to remembrance. God was concerned that what was done this day would be remembered for ever.

'You shall keep it as a feast (chag).' This is the general term for the later pilgrimage feasts of Israel. It signified a feast of unity, and while Passover was observed in separate houses it was observed by the congregation of Israel all at the same time. And its connection with the feast of unleavened bread meant that in the future it would have to be observed in connection with the gathering together of the people of Israel. In this sense it too would be a pilgrimage feast.

Instructions Concerning the Later Feast of Unleavened Bread (12.15-20).

These instructions had the future in mind. They would not be in their houses in order to observe it in Egypt, although it may well have been a feast that they previously observed. But now it was to be directly connected with the Passover, and with the haste in which they left

Egypt.

- **a** They were to eat unleavened bread for seven days, and on the first day put all unleavened bread out of their houses, for whoever eats unleavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person will be cut off from Israel (15).
- **b** On the first day was to be a holy gathering and on the seventh day was to be a holy gathering, and no manner of work was to be done except what a man must eat (16).
- **c** The feast of unleavened bread was to be observed on the selfsame day as Yahweh brought their hosts out of Egypt (17a).
- **c** Which is why they will observe this day throughout their generations by an ordinance for ever (17b).
- **b** On the first month, on the fourteenth day in the evening they were to eat unleavened bread, until the twenty first day in the evening (18).
- **a** For seven days no leaven was to be found in their houses, for whoever ate what was leavened, that person was to be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether a resident alien or one born in the land. Nothing leavened was to be eaten. In all their dwellings they must eat unleavened bread (19-20).

We note in 'a' the parallels. In both the feast was to be for seven days when there was to be no leaven, and any who ate of unleavened bread was to be cut off from among the people. In the former the leaven is to be put out of their houses, and in the latter they must eat unleavened bread in all their houses. In 'b' we have the mention in both, in different ways, of the first and the seventh day, described in the parallel as the fourteenth and twenty first day. In 'c' the day to be celebrated is stressed in both cases.

12.15 "Seven days shall you eat unleavened bread. Even the first day you shall put away leaven out of your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh that person shall be cut off from Israel."

The earlier patriarchal family tribe under Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would certainly have observed a number of feasts (for example the sheep shearing - see on Genesis 31.19), and as they produced crops this would have included a celebration of the beginning of the barley harvest which, in Canaan, would have taken place at this time of the year. It is probable that these feasts had been continued in Egypt, as part of their tradition, to retain a connection with their roots. But it would be linked to something else, so that, apart from the connection with unleavened bread, a seven day feast may already have been observed at this time. Such customs are notoriously tenacious even over long periods of time.

But this time the deliverance would not give the children of Israel time to leaven their bread (12.34, 37). Thus from this time on this feast, which had in Canaan been connected with the beginning of the barley harvest, (and would be again), but in Egypt was probably connected with some other reason for celebration, was to be observed with unleavened bread to remind them of their deliverance from Egypt. It would be a feast to which all the children of Israel gathered. This feast is now given a special meaning and connected with the Passover, although shown as a distinctive feast. (Notice how the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are dealt with separately in 12.43-49 and 13.3-9. Later they would be seen as one as a result of the passage of time, but that is not yet).

'Seven days.' A divinely perfect period. We do not know whether at this stage the children of Israel observed the 'seven day week' as we know it. Probably not for no mention is made of the institution of the weekly Sabbath until Exodus 16. But it would be wrong to assume that 'seven days' necessarily anywhere indicates a recognised week. 'Seven days' was commonly recognised as a sacred period not necessarily directly connected to the calendar, for the number seven had a sacred significance throughout the Near East. Thus the Babylonian flood

story had a seven day flood. But they did not have a seven day week. The Philistines held a seven day wedding feast (Judges 14.17) but did not observe the Sabbath. And while this seven day period begins and ends with a sabbath, these sabbaths were not what came to be the regular Sabbath.

'You shall eat unleavened bread (cakes).' This is bread (plural) made from dough to which yeast had not been introduced, baked in the form of flat cakes. The initial significance of this in context was that they would go in haste without leaving time for the bread to be leavened (12.34, 39). Thus the feast would be a continual reminder of that hasty departure. But it probably also gained a new significance from the fact that leaven had a 'corrupting' influence on the dough, unleavened bread thus signifying the necessity for purity. The escape from Egypt rescued them from the leaven of Egypt, the corrupting influence of Egypt, and their being united in the covenant was intended to deliver them from the leaven of sin. It thus continued to indicate deliverance from the world's influence and from sin.

'The first day you shall put away leaven out of your houses.' All leaven had to be removed from each house so that only unleavened bread remained. We are probably justified in seeing in this a picture of the need for the removal of all corrupting tendencies from the lives of partakers.

'Whoever eats --- that person shall be cut off from Israel.' Unity with Jacob (Israel) in the covenant of Yahweh requires obedience to the demands of the covenant God. Thus to deliberately partake of leavened bread during the seven day period would be to signify an unwillingness to belong to the covenant community, and would result in removal from 'the congregation of Israel'. Such a person might even, at this stage, be put to death (Numbers 15.27-36). To have become a member of the covenant was a serious matter. But being 'cut off' may simply indicate expulsion.

12.16 "And on the first day there shall be for you a holy gathering, and on the seventh day a holy gathering, no manner of work shall be done in them except what every man must eat, that only may be done for you."

The seven day period was to begin on day one and end on day seven with both days being observed as days of rest from labour, apart from that necessary for the feast. They were holy days. On these days they would gather for feasting and worship. They were days set apart for God later to become known as 'sabbaths'. Thus such set apart days (both the first and the last of the seven) were to be seen as times when no work must be done. This was to be as a reminder of the bondage that had been theirs in Egypt. The idea of a seventh day sabbath would later develop into a regular Sabbath day every seven days (16.5, 23, 25, 29-30; 20.8-11), a sign that they were continually His free people, provided for by Him. But they would not have been able to observe such a regular Sabbath in Egypt. Thus after the regular Sabbath was instituted there could in the feast of unleavened bread be three sabbaths, the day one sabbath, the day seven sabbath, and the regular Sabbath.

12.17 "And you shall observe the Mazzoth (unleavened bread). For on this selfsame day have I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations by an ordinance for ever."

From this day on the first day of this feast would be a reminder of their being freed from slavery. As they ceased from work they would remember how they had been freed from slavery in Egypt. So from this day on the fifteenth day of Abib was a day set apart, a day on which the Passover would be eaten (having been killed on the fourteenth between the two evenings) and as a day of cessation from labour.

12.18-20 “In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month when evening comes, you will eat unleavened bread, until the twenty first day in the evening. Seven days there will be no leaven in your houses, for whoever eats what is leavened that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a sojourner or one born in the land. You shall eat nothing leavened. In all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.”

The details are now repeated so that the listeners are reminded of them. (In the first place Moses and Aaron, but finally all who listen to this account read out at a feast). The ban on unleavened bread begins on the fourteenth day of the month as the next evening approaches and the Passover lamb is killed, and goes on until the end of the twenty first day, a period of just over seven days.

‘Whether he be a sojourner or one born in the land.’ This is looking forward to the ideal day when the land promised to their fathers, and to them in 3.8, finally belongs to them in its totality. All would know of the land that God had promised to give to the seed of Abraham (Genesis 13.15 etc.). This was confirmation that these promises were to be fulfilled in the not too distant future. Then every one in that land, whether born there, or living there having been born elsewhere, will be subject to these regulations. This is a message of hope for it guarantees that they are to receive the land promised to their fathers. God has promised that He is delivering them so as to give them the land (3.8). This is spoken in anticipation of, and guarantee of, that day. Their inheritance is guaranteed to them on this their day of deliverance.

‘In all your dwellings.’ Every household among the people will be involved.

The Elders Are Instructed How To Observe the First Passover And Yahweh Passes Over Egypt and Slays The Firstborn (12.21-30).

- a Moses calls on the elders of Israel that all families shall take lambs/kids and kill the Passover and put blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses and not go out until the morning (21-22).
- b For Yahweh will pass through to smite the Egyptians and when He sees the blood He will pass over them and not allow the Destroyer to enter their houses to smite them (23).
- c And they will observe this for an ordinance for themselves and their sons for ever (24).
- d And when they come to the land which He has given them as He promised they will keep this service, and when their children ask ‘what does this service mean?’ (25-26).
- d Their children will be told that it is the sacrifice of Yahweh’s Passover Who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians and delivered Israel’s houses (27).
- c And the people bowed their heads and worshipped, and the children of Israel went and did all that Yahweh had commanded Moses and Aaron (28).
- b And at midnight Yahweh smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the lowest (29).
- a And Pharaoh rose in the night, and all his grandees, and all the people of Egypt, and there was a great cry in Egypt, and there was not a house where there was not one dead (30).

This is a passage of contrasts. In ‘a’ the children of Israel are safe in their houses, for they are protected by the blood on doorpost and lintel and by staying within their houses until morning, in the parallel is the contrast with Pharaoh and his people where there is a great cry and there is no house where there is not one dead. In ‘b’ Yahweh passes through and smites the Egyptians while the houses of the Israelites are safe because of the blood so that the Destroyer does not enter their houses, while in the parallel Yahweh smites all the firstborn in the land of Egypt regardless of status, and none are delivered. In ‘c’ there is the requirement for the perpetual keeping of the ordinance, an act of obedience and solemn worship, while in the

parallel the people bow their heads and worship and do all that Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron. Here there is the parallel of future obedience and worship and present worship and obedience. In 'd' there is the contrast of the future blessing when they are safely settled in the land which Yahweh has given them with the present deliverance, and we have the question put by the son of the family about what this service means, paralleled by the explanation of what it does mean, that it is the sacrifice of Yahweh's Passover when He passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt and smote the Egyptians, delivering the households of Israel.

The Call To Prepare for the Passover (12.21-23).

12.21 'Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Draw out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover."'

That these instructions result from Moses having already explained what is in the previous verses comes out in that he speaks of 'the passover' as though they will understand it. Now he tells them to carry them into effect. There is thus a period of four to five days between the 'drawing' and the 'killing' in which they can begin to prepare for their deliverance.

'The elders of Israel.' The lay rulers, heads of tribes and sub-tribes and their advisers.

12.22 "And you shall take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood which is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin, and none of you will go out of his house until the morning. For Yahweh will pass through to smite the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two side posts, Yahweh will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to smite you."

They are to put blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses using hyssop dipped in the blood from the slain lamb gathered in a basin, and striking the doorposts and lintel. They are then to remain in their houses, for Yahweh will go through the land of Egypt to smite the Egyptians (in the Hebrew 'pass through' has no stem connection with 'pass over'). And when He sees the blood on the lintel and doorposts He will 'pass over' (the thought is of protection by hovering or circling over - see 12.11 and Isaiah 31.5) and prevent destruction because He will know them as those who are in the covenant community and under His protection, and as those who have made the offering of the lamb, with whom He is well pleased.

'A bunch of hyssop.' This plant is generally considered to be a species of marjoram, a common, fragrant grey-leaved, wiry stemmed perennial herb 20-30 centimetres (about 1 foot) high having white flowers in small heads and growing in dry, rocky places.

'The blood which is in the basin.' The lamb's blood is to be collected in a basin, and the hyssop then dipped in, and the blood put on the lintels and doorposts of their houses. Comparison with Exodus 24.6-8 suggests that by this the house and those within it are seen as included in Yahweh's covenant. (There it was sprinkled on pillars representing the people and on the people themselves, here it is put on the lintel and doorposts of the houses where they are, which symbolise the whole household). This application of the blood confirms the sacrificial significance of the slaying of the lamb. It had to be applied in accordance with ritual, and the blood must not be touched.

'None of you will go out of his house until the morning.' The house has been made holy to Yahweh by the application of the blood and those who are within it share that holiness and so must not go out into the mundane world. They are thus invulnerable and seen as under His protection. They are His. (To suggest that it meant that they must not go out because of some demon destroyer is to overlook the fact that only the firstborn were in danger from such a destroyer).

'For Yahweh will pass through to smite the Egyptians.' It is made quite clear that it is Yahweh Himself Who smites the Egyptians. The blood is not for protection to divert demons nor a marker to identify the houses, but as a token to Yahweh that those within the house are within the covenant.

'Will not allow the destroyer to come into your houses.' It is Yahweh Who is the Destroyer and it is Yahweh Who is the Protector. We can compare how sometimes He distinguished Himself as 'the angel of Yahweh', almost as another self (Genesis chapters 16 and 22 and often, see also Genesis 48.16; Isaiah 63.9). He is thus depicted as acting to prevent Himself from destroying.

Because blood applied to the entrance into dwellings, whether houses or tents, was elsewhere at other times used for the purpose of diverting demons and evil spirits, some have sought to apply that here (what are called 'apotropaic' rites to divert evil influences or bad luck). But this can only be done by totally ignoring the context. As with all ceremonies the meaning of actions changes depending on belief. We ourselves engage in traditions whose meaning has been transformed (such as the use of mistletoe). And this applies here. Here the blood is stated specifically to be to guarantee the protection of Yahweh Who is outside as Protector, not to prevent Yahweh or anything else entering. The children of Israel have been freed (at least theoretically) from the idea of other gods and demons affecting their lives for they are within Yahweh's covenant.

This Feast Was To Become An Ordinance For The Future And Their Children Instructed In Its Significance (12.24-28).

12.24-27a "And each of you shall observe this thing for an ordinance to you and to your sons for ever. And it shall happen that, when your children will say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?', you will say, 'It is the sacrifice of Yahweh's passover who hovered over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians and delivered our houses.'"

It is constantly emphasised that what is to happen is so stupendous that it will act for ever as a reminder of the faithfulness of Yahweh to His covenant (compare verse 17). And this is spelt out in the form of someone asking, 'Why do you serve God in this way?' And the reply is, 'This is the sacrifice to do with Yahweh's protective watch over His people when He smote the Egyptians'. The change to a singular verb indicates 'each and all of you'.

Here the killing of the Passover lamb is specifically described as 'zebach'. This would later be the name for the 'peace offering' (Leviticus 3 and 4) but here it more generally means sacrifices other than the whole burnt offering of which they could partake (see Exodus 10.25 compare Genesis 31.54; 46.1; Exodus 18.12; 24.5). Later the stipulation would be made that it should only be offered 'in the place that Yahweh your God shall choose' (Deuteronomy 16.5-6). Note again the emphasis on Yahweh's protective watch, and that it is He Himself Who will smite the Egyptians.

12.27b-28 'And the people bowed the head and worshipped. And the children of Israel went and did so. As Yahweh had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did.'

The people respond in obedience and worship and do what they have been commanded through Moses and Aaron. Thus are they ready when Yahweh acts. Note that they no longer grumble or disagree with what Moses says. What has previously occurred has filled them with awe and they have recognised that Yahweh is acting for them.

The Judgment of The Passover (12.29-30).

12.29 'And it came about at midnight that Yahweh smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle.'

In the middle of the night 'all' the firstborn in the land of Egypt were smitten from the highest to the lowest. The maidservant behind the mill of 11.5 has been replaced here by the captive in the dungeon. Both were seen as on a similar level.

It is difficult to comment on this awe-inspiring and dreadful statement. A terrible epidemic passes through a whole nation so that on one night the vast multiplicity of deaths strikes terror in the minds of the people, and yet not one household of the children of Israel is affected. And the firstborn seem particularly to have been affected in a widespread way. We put it this way because no one could have checked that every single firstborn died, and it is possible that others died too. But outstanding examples were certainly known such as the firstborn of the house of Pharaoh and the firstborn of prisoners in dungeons. All classes were affected.

And this was at the hand of Yahweh. Whatever the secondary cause, the primary directing was His, for He controls all things. The judgment may seem appalling, and it truly was. But we may also see in it an act of mercy. Only the firstborn died, whereas God could have smitten the whole of Egypt. However it was sufficient for its purpose. The whole of Egypt wanted to get rid of the Israelites.

(While not detracting in any way from the huge significance of the event, we must remember that such general statements are not always to be applied absolutely literally. The wording would be satisfied if the large majority of the firstborn died sufficient to give the impression of universality (indeed we know that no one in a protected house died). 'All' can often mean 'most' or 'the vast majority' compare Genesis 12.3; 14.11; 20.8; 24.1; 24.36 with 25.5-6; 29.22; 31.1, 6; 34.29; 41.56, 57; 47.14, 15; Exodus 1.14, 22; 9.25; 18.1, 8, 14; 33.19; Numbers 14.2; Deuteronomy 2.32 and often, including 2 Samuel 11.18; 1 Kings 4.29, 30, 34).

'The firstborn of Pharaoh.' A potential god in the making but his father, or grandfather, Pharaoh, incarnation of the god Horus, could do nothing to prevent it. Clearly the 'firstborn of Pharaoh' means of those present in the land. Thus if Pharaoh's actual firstborn was away on a military expedition then the next in line would presumably be affected, possibly his son if he had one.

But it would not be the first time in history that a detrimental fact was covered up. If Pharaoh's first born son did die in this ignominious way, it could well have been 'covered up' and not written into the histories. He could have become a non-person. Histories were on the whole written to bring glory to those about whom the history was written, not in order to tell the truth. Israel were exceptional in recording all their bad points and failures, probably because their histories were written by prophets.

12.30 'And Pharaoh rose up in the night, 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.'

The greatness of the tragedy is stressed. It is significant that whatever killed the firstborn did so in such a way as to waken each household. This may suggest some dreadful illness which caused first suffering and misery, and finally death. It may have arisen from the effects of previous plagues leaving bacteria which were stirred up by the wind or simply had a delayed effect, but it occurred when needed and in the way required. We may theorise about what it was but it affected both man and cattle, and especially affected the firstborn, and all in one night. And in the end we are clearly told that it was the hand of God.

'Pharaoh --- all his servants --- all the Egyptians.' Again we have the depiction of the different classes in Egypt, Pharaoh, his high officials and bureaucrats, and the common people. And all were affected. From every house came the cry of mourning. But again the 'all' is not necessarily to be taken literally. It means the Egyptians on the whole. Some houses would not contain a firstborn son. Others would contain more than one firstborn. Although it may be that the deaths were more widespread than the firstborn.

The Final Farewell (12.31-36).

Yahweh has delivered the final telling blow and Pharaoh tells Moses and Aaron that very night that they may go with all that they have and worship Yahweh, and seeks his right as their overlord to expect a blessing from their God. They thus depart loaded with riches as the Egyptians, eager to see them go, pour treasures on them, probably with the hope of placating Yahweh.

- **a Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron by night and tells them all to go and serve Yahweh and seeks a blessing for himself (31-32).**
- **b The Egyptians are urgent that they leave in haste because of the trail of death (33).**
- **b The children of Israel take their unleavened dough (thus leaving in haste) and all their domestic equipment (34).**
- **a They obtain jewels of silver and gold from the Egyptians (35) in accordance with the word of Moses, for Yahweh gives them favour in the eyes of the Egyptians so that they give them all that they desire and they spoil the Egyptians. (While Pharaoh was seeking a blessing for himself, Yahweh was ensuring a blessing for His people).**

The Command To Depart (12.31-32)

12.31-32 'And he called for Moses and Aaron by night and said, "Rise up, get yourselves out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel, and go, serve Yahweh as you have said. Take both your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone. And bless me also." '

This last plague was too much even for Pharaoh. He now wanted nothing more than to get Moses and Aaron away from his people as soon as possible. Possibly in spite of his earlier statement he called them to him at his palace, or it may be that his words were passed on through a high official, for he would himself be in mourning. And he gave them the permission that they had been seeking, including all that Moses had previously demanded (10.9, 26). They could go and serve Yahweh in the wilderness. And he goes so far as to ask Yahweh's blessing on himself. He has come a long way from his sarcastic question, "Who is Yahweh?" (5.2). Now he knows and seeks His benediction.

It was quite normal for kings to expect their tributaries to offer sacrifices on their behalf as a sign of loyalty, and to seek blessing from their God. This was still not permission to finally leave Egypt for good, but God knew what He was working towards.

The People's Departure and the Reaction of the Egyptians (12.33-36).

12.33 'And the Egyptians acted with great urgency towards the people to send them out of the land as soon as possible, for they said "We are all dead men."'

The ordinary Egyptians and the bureaucrats were also eager to see the back of the children of Israel. They had had enough. All their firstborn were dead. Soon they might be included as well.

'We are all dead men.' This may be a rueful look at their firstborn children lying dead in their beds, or may imply that they feared suffering the same fate themselves. What had happened to one could happen to all. As the plagues had gone by they had thought that things were so bad that they could not get worse. But they had got worse. And now this was the worst of all. And they recognised that if they did not get rid of the Israelites, it might get even worse still. Soon none might be left alive.

12.34 'And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes on their shoulders.'

A homely description confirming that all leaven had been got rid of. All they now had was unleavened dough. The fact that they felt that they could not wait for it to leaven illustrates the speed at which they left. All this confirms that the getting rid of the leaven was a specific act carried out in fulfilment of Yahweh's command as otherwise there must have been some leavened bread still available. This was in obedience to 12.15.

The description of the kneadingtroughs on the shoulder suggests an eyewitness account. The purpose of mentioning them was to show that they were not in use. The bearing of such things in the loose clothing around the shoulders is still practised among Arabs.

12.35-36 'And the children of Israel did as Moses had said, and they asked of the Egyptians jewels of silver and jewels of gold and clothing. And Yahweh gave the people favour in the eyes of the Egyptians so that they let them have what they asked. And they spoiled the Egyptians.'

Compare for this 4.21-22; 11.2-3. It was important that the people depart as victors to demonstrate the superiority of Yahweh. The children of Israel possibly knew that they were leaving for good for that was what Yahweh had promised right at the beginning (3.8, 16), although it may be that at this stage they were still not sure and simply obeying Yahweh's commands. What the Egyptians thought we are not told. They were probably so keen to get rid of them that they did not care. It was only Pharaoh with his insatiable demand for slave labourers who thought at this stage in terms of their returning.

The jewels of silver and gold and the splendid clothing would be given with a view to pleasing Yahweh at the feast in the wilderness, and placating Him. It was to be for His treasure house. Or it may be that a cowed people were just happy to pour the riches on them hoping that it might please Yahweh and thus save them from further plagues. Either way the children of Israel departed with the spoils of war.

Note the interesting irony that Pharaoh had sought a blessing on himself, which would include a wish for his prosperity, while Yahweh was ensuring the prosperity of His own people.

So all having been done as Yahweh had commanded, they were ready to go on their way. Their permission was to go into the wilderness to serve Yahweh. But Yahweh's intention was that they leave Egypt permanently as He had promised and soon Pharaoh would panic and chase them with his army, breaking his treaty with Yahweh and releasing them from any obligation to return.