

MEN'S CLUB SHABBAT

JANUARY 4, 2008

SERMON

This week we begin the story of the Exodus and the ten plagues. Now, we all know the basic story, of how God instructed Moses and Aaron to demand of Pharaoh that he “Let my People Go!” Moses asked God “Why would Pharaoh listen to me?” and God answered, *leave that to me*. And we know of Pharaoh’s reluctance and repeated flip-flopping on the promise of freedom.

Much has been written of how God “Hardened Pharaoh’s Heart,” and why this would be. In researching this Torah portion, I learned quite a bit, but one thing really struck me. This period represents a major change in God’s strategy.

Until this time, God worked through Concealed Miracles. Concealed in the sense that God never explicitly made his presence obvious. He had always used the forces of nature, such as Noah and the great flood, to effect his wishes. Yes, God spoke to one selected individual who then executed his instructions. But the population as a whole had to take it on faith that it was God’s hand at work.

But in Egypt, God changes his tactics. He doesn’t tell Moses that the plagues will happen. He tells Moses *to tell Pharaoh that the God of the Hebrews* will bring these calamities upon Egypt. Why does he do this? Why the change in strategy? Why *ten* plagues? And why things so outrageous that they could never have been the result of nature or natural disasters? Why did God not do just one big thing and then cause the Egyptians to let the Hebrews go?

Well, I don’t pretend to speak for God, but the theory, advanced by Man, that I like the best, is, as I like to put it, the “It’s time to kick some butt” theory. I’m sure someone has put a more polite name to it, but I haven’t found it.

So what is this theory and how does it play out? As I see it, the world at this time was pretty God-less. Well, actually, it was quite the opposite. They had more gods than you could shake a stick at. Somebody somewhere had a god for just about everything. You could find a god to pray to and to sacrifice to for pretty much anything you needed. A

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good harvest. Fertility. Rain. That your child wouldn't walk with a limp. Frankly, I don't know how they kept track of them all.

The Egyptians actually had so many gods that they organized them in tiers. There were three different levels. Don't ask me how you got promoted up the ranks, but this was their system. At the top of the heap there were nine major gods, plus one. Pharaoh considered himself to be the tenth god. But who were the other nine and what has this got to do with the plagues and the Exodus?

This is where it gets good. Sylvester Stallone or Chuck Norris could relate. It's kind of the original "Die Hard, With Vengeance."

Let's go through the list of Egyptian top-tier gods and the corresponding plagues.

1. **Osiris** – God of the Nile. Plague Number One: Turn the Nile, and all the waters of Egypt, to blood, the symbol of death. Neither Osiris nor the Egyptian wizards could undo this. Thus the Hebrew's God trumps Osiris.
2. The second Egyptian god was **Sobek**, the crocodile god, son of **Nut**, the goddess of Virility. The second plague: Frogs, as it is commonly know. In the Mishnah, however, it is written that it was really crocodiles, that 'came up out of the Nile.' The Midrash says that the crocodiles bit the Egyptian males at the 'normally covered parts of the body,' thus depriving them of their virility. Pretty good – two gods with one plague.

By the way, keep track of these names. The Men's Club guys will be handing out a quiz later.

3. **Ra**, the Sun-God was third. The Egyptians believed that he was lord over all the earth. The third plague, lice, overran the earth and Ra was powerless to stop it. Three down!
4. **Set**, the serpent-god, was the god of destruction. The forth plague was **insects**, or swarming creatures, scorpions and venomous snakes. They overran the fields and out destructed Set.
5. The horned-goddess, **Isis**, was the goddess of fertility, nurture, and protection, especially over the cattle. Yet she was powerless to stop the pestilence which destroyed the cattle.

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Five down. Are you getting the pattern here?

6. **Nephythys**, the mother-goddess of embalming, the preservation of the flesh, was next. The sixth plague was Boils. The Medrash (Shmos Rabah 11:6) says that the Egyptians were afflicted with leprosy that causes the flesh to decay, proving the ineffectiveness of Nephthys, who could not stop this plague.
7. The seventh plague was a destructive Hail-storm. And, by the way, this was no ordinary hail. It combined two normally opposite and conflicting elements – fire and water. These balls of ice exploded into fire when they hit the ground. The deity, **Tefnut**, was supposed to be the beneficent rain-goddess. The Egyptians prayed to her to stop the devastating hail. They quickly learned that she had no power over the God of Israel. *Not too shabby!*
8. The eighth plague was Locusts. The swarm of locusts blocked out the sun and feverishly devoured the crops of Egypt. The god of vegetation, **Geb**, was rendered impotent.
9. The ninth plague was Darkness. Rashi (10:21-22) tells us that the air became thick and black. It was so thick that the Egyptians were trapped in the very position they had assumed when the plague struck. They were unable to move. This plague was to demonstrate that the Egyptian god of air, **Shu**, was no match for the God of Israel.
10. The tenth plague was the Death of the Firstborn. **Pharaoh** believed that he too was a god. Yet, he had to plead with Moses to spare his own life and restore his son.

So, can you imagine God watching the development of humanity since the Garden of Eden, seeing the proliferation of gods, too numerous to name, across all civilizations, getting just a bit fed up. And finally deciding to do something about this. So, instead of simply telling Moses and having him spread the word, God decided it was time to show off a bit. Why did he “harden Pharaoh’s heart?” Simply because he wanted to be sure to destroy or discredit *all* of the Egyptian gods. He did not want Pharaoh to give in too soon. If he freed the Hebrews after one or two plagues, would history have recorded this as quite the event it was?

An interesting historical side note, according to the ancient Egyptian historian, Manetho, and the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius: the name of the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus was

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Amenophis, more commonly called Amenhotep. His son and successor, Akenaten, did away with the Egyptian collection of gods and taught a monotheistic religion throughout the land. However, he also taught that he was godlike since he was god's conduit to earth. (Sounds suspiciously like the Catholic Church!) Some 'habits' are hard to give up.

So what's the message here? Basically, you don't want to mess with the Big Guy. (No, not Rabbi Wisnia, the more eternal Big Guy.) He may be patient and he may be forgiving, but, if you push him too far, he hits back hard.