

MOSES (Part 3)



Exodus 12:12 "It is the Passover of the LORD. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance."

Today's Reading from the Old Testament is the Institution of the great Feast of Passover, when all the Hebrew slaves in

Egypt were instructed by Moses to slaughter a lamb and to paint the doorposts of their houses with its blood, and then to roast the lamb and eat it hurriedly, with their loins girded, their sandals on their feet, and their staff in their hand. For the Lord God was about to rescue his people in Egypt, and this feast would be an annual remembrance of God's great deliverance.

The Passover event was *the* most important part of the Exodus, it is *the* climax of the story, though we often tend to focus on the singular confrontation between Moses and the Pharaoh, or the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, which we will focus on next week. But this night of Passover is the real climax of the story of the Exodus and so it is celebrated every year by Jews with a Seder meal, with unleavened bread and in the days of the Temple with a slaughter of lambs. For Christians, the Passover is also an important foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus, of the power of God to save his people with the blood of the lamb, the Lamb of God. In almost every language except English, what we English-speaking Christians call the feast of Easter is called Passover by Christians in other lands and in other tongues, and so English-speaking congregations sometimes miss this important connection between Passover and the Easter story.

So how did we get from last week's Old Testament Reading of the story of Moses and the burning bush to here, to the angel of

death passing over the houses of the Hebrews? Last week, you will remember, the Lord God told Moses from the burning bush that he had heard the cries of his people in slavery in Egypt and was calling Moses to rescue them. We saw in the sermon how a reluctant Moses had to be convinced a bit by God to take up that call, with a few signs and wonders and promises, and the presence of his brother Aaron as his spokesman and all the elders of the Hebrews as backup, but that finally Moses did take up the task.

Also in last week's sermon, I noted two details that are found in the story of the burning bush, but are never read on Sunday mornings or pictured in the Hollywood movies. Because Moses was such a reluctant hero, the Lord God told Moses to go first not to Pharaoh, but to all the elders of the Israelites back in Egypt; because the elders will believe Moses, and then God instructed Moses to take the elders with him to confront Pharaoh. Secondly, God told Moses to ask the Pharaoh, not to release the Hebrews from their forced labor, 'to let my people go' from slavery, but instead to simply to ask Pharaoh for some time off, to go three days' journey into the Sinai to make a sacrifice to their God on Mount Horeb, a religious holiday, a long weekend of sorts, with the implication that they would be coming back.

So when Moses and Aaron and all the elders of the Israelites first came to the Pharaoh and requested this religious holiday, the Pharaoh replied angrily, "Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get (back) to your labors!" And the Pharaoh wanting to punish them for making such a request, then ordered that those Hebrew slaves must now make bricks without straw. Moses thereafter called out to the Lord God in distress: why have done this to us? Why did you send me? But God then promised great signs and wonders to impress the Pharaoh. And when Moses told this to the Israelites; they would not listen to Moses anymore, because of their broken spirits and the cruelty of their forced labor, now having to make bricks without straw. They had had enough.

Still Moses and Aaron went back to Pharaoh and did as the LORD had commanded. This is when God instructed Aaron, not Moses, but Aaron to throw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Then Pharaoh summoned the magicians of Egypt, who did the same trick by their secret arts; but then Aaron's staff which had turned into a snake swallowed up theirs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, we are told, and he would not listen to them. In fact, God tells Moses later that God was the one hardening Pharaoh's heart, and one has to wonder why.

Clearly greater signs and wonders than this were obviously necessary. And so begins the so-called great Ten Plagues; we all probably remember that part from Sunday School, though few of us could actually recite all ten in order! But as a part of the Passover Seder each year, most every Jew recites the ten plagues, plagues which follow a sort of natural order if you think about it. First the waters of the Nile turned the color of blood, what scientists now call a 'red tide.' As a result of this likely algae bloom, the fish in the river died and the Egyptians could not drink the water. The second plague was an invasion of frogs, presumably fleeing the algae bloom in the Nile. Thirdly, there was a plague of gnats, presumably feasting on the abundance of dying fish in the river. Fourthly, there was a plague of flies, presumably feeding upon the gnats and dead fish. Fifthly, there was a plague of diseased livestock, presumably from diseases borne by all the gnats and flies and dying fish and tainted water. Sixthly, there was a plague of boils, on both the animals and humans, also probably derived from the diseased livestock and flies and gnats and dead fish and tainted water. The Seventh so-called plague, however, may have been unrelated to the others. For the seventh plague was simply a great hail storm that destroyed the crops in the fields. This was followed by a plague of locusts which came in on an east wind, and presumably feasted on the damaged crops.

The Ninth so-called plague was darkness, a darkness that covered Egypt for three days, perhaps a solar eclipse or an unexpected storm. At the end of that plague, the poor Pharaoh was struggling to deal with all these natural disasters facing him and his people, and said to Moses, who must have been bothering him this whole time giving his God the credit for each of these disasters, and so the Pharaoh said to Moses, "Get away from me! Take care that you do not see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die." Moses said, "Just as you say! I will never see your face again." But first Moses warned the Pharaoh that the Lord God was going to strike down all the first born sons of Egypt, just as the Pharaoh had struck down the sons of the Hebrew slaves earlier, when Moses escaped in a basket hidden in the bull rushes. This was Divine retribution of sorts, death for the Egyptian children, presumably from the diseases borne by all those flies and gnats and dying livestock and fish and tainted water.

So the Hebrews prepared for that great night of death and destruction by slaughtering their lambs and painting the blood of the lambs on the door post so that the angel of death would pass over them. At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh

and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead, we are told.

Sometime during the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! **Go, worship the LORD as you have requested.** Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me." And the other Egyptians urged the Hebrew people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!" So the Hebrew people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing. The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians their neighbors for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, we are told, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians. Clearly the Hebrew people and their God were being blamed for this recent series of natural disasters, so their Egyptian neighbors gave them what they asked for as a kind of bribery of sorts, I imagine, simply to get rid of them, to simply end this disastrous series of plagues that continue to afflict them. And so the Hebrews plundered the Egyptians and left with their herds and their flocks, with the Egyptian silver and gold and fine clothing,

with their children, alive when so many of the Egyptian children were dead or dying.

----- So then, were the Hebrews now escaping their slavery in Egypt, or just going off on a three days' journey to make a sacrifice to the Lord God on Mount Horeb? Were the Hebrews released from the forced bondage by their Egyptian taskmasters or were they simply blamed for all the recent disasters and banished, sent away to appease their God, or did they simply escape amidst all the death and confusion? Either way, the Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, not counting the women and children, and with livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds, along with their unleavened bread, and with the Egyptian gold and silver and fine linen.

When the Pharaoh of Egypt was told that the Hebrews had left after that night of death and destruction, the night of Passover, the mind of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting the Hebrew slaves go?" So the Pharaoh had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred chariots and all his officers. The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh of Egypt again, we are told, and he pursued the Israelites; and the Egyptians finally overtook the escaping Hebrews camped by a sea of reeds. But what happened there is next week's story. Amen.