

THE PLAGUES OF EGYPT

An Egyptian eye-witness testified to the plagues which God sent upon ancient Egypt—a sage by the name of Ipuwer who lived during the terminal phase of the Middle Kingdom. The **Ipuwer papyrus** was acquired by the Museum of Leiden in the Netherlands in 1828. The text is now folded into a book of 17 pages, written in hieratic signs (Full text can be found online at <http://nefartini.iwebland.com/tests/ipuwer.htm>). Portions of it are poorly preserved, but of the portions which have been translated by Alan H. Gardiner in 1909 we have an amazing corroboration of the dramatic plagues Almighty God sent upon ancient Egypt! As Gardiner writes, “It is no merely local disturbance that is here described, but a great and overwhelming national disaster” (Gardiner, *Admonitions*).

Now notice the incredible parallels between this document and the record of the book of Exodus:

An Eye-witness to the Plagues

Ipuwer describes an incredible story of lamentations, ruin, and horror. His story is an Egyptian version of a great national calamity. He writes:

PAPYRUS 2:8 Forsooth [In truth I lie not], the land turns round as does a potter's wheel.

PAPYRUS 2:11 The towns are destroyed. Upper Egypt has become dry (wastes?).

PAPYRUS 3:13 All is ruin!

PAPYRUS 7:4 The residence is overturned in a minute.

PAPYRUS 4:2 ... Years of noise. There is no end to noise.

The play on the word “noise” here could mean “earthquake,” as the Hebrew word *raash* signifies both noise and earthquake. Earthquakes are often accompanied by loud ominous sounds from the bowels of the earth.

PAPYRUS 6:1 Oh, that the earth would cease from noise, and tumult (uproar) be no more.

The Plague of Blood

Now notice this amazing parallel between the Bible account of the plagues on Egypt and the Papyrus Ipuwer:

EXODUS 7:21 ... there was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.

PAPYRUS 2:5-6 Plague is throughout the land. Blood is everywhere.

EXODUS 7:20-24 ... all the waters in the river were turned to blood ... And all the Egyptians dug all around the river for water to drink, for they could not drink of the water of the river.

PAPYRUS 2:10 Men shrink from tasting—human beings and thirst after water.

PAPYRUS 3:10-13 That is our water! That is our happiness! What shall we do in respect thereof? All is ruin!

The Plague of Murrain

EXODUS 9:3 ... the hand of the LORD is upon your livestock in the field, upon the horses, upon the donkeys, upon the camels, upon the oxen, and upon the sheep, a very grievous plague [murrain].

PAPYRUS 5:5 All animals, their hearts weep. Cattle moan.

The Plague of Hail

After plagues of frogs, lice, flies, and the disease of murrain on the cattle, God brought on Egypt the destruction of a massive hailstorm which destroyed crops everywhere. This also was recorded by the Egyptian Ipuwer. Notice!

EXODUS 9:25 ... and the hail struck every herb of the field, and broke every tree of the field.

EXODUS 9:31 The flax and the barley *were* stricken, for the barley was in the head, and the flax was in bud.

EXODUS 10:15 ... there did not remain any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the fields, through all the land of Egypt.

PAPYRUS 4:14 Trees are destroyed.

PAPYRUS 6:1 No fruit nor herbs are found ...

PAPYRUS 2:10 Forsooth, gates, columns and walls are consumed by fire.

PAPYRUS 10:3-6 Lower Egypt weeps ... The entire palace is without its revenues. To it belong (by right) wheat and barley, geese and fish.

PAPYRUS 6:3 Forsooth, grain has perished on every side.

PAPYRUS 5:12 Forsooth, that has perished which yesterday was seen. The land is left over to its weariness like the cutting of flax.

This last statement shows clearly these plagues on Egypt were not the consequence of long -lasting drought. Rather, this was a sudden onslaught of disaster, virtually overnight! What was visible yesterday was perished today! The produce of Egypt was cut down, like the cutting of flax —a sudden, incisive event!

The Plague of Locusts

EXODUS 10:4-5 ... tomorrow I will bring the locusts into your country. And they shall cover the face of the ground ... And they shall eat the rest of that which has escaped, which remains to you from the hail, and shall eat every tree which grows for you out of the field...

PAPYRUS 6:1 No fruit nor herbs are found ... hunger.

The Plague of Darkness

EXODUS 10:22-23 ... and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They did not see one another, nor did any rise from his place, *for* three days

PAPYRUS 9:11 The land is not light ...

This plague of darkness is further described in another ancient Egyptian document, a black granite monolith or shrine at the border of Egypt, inscribed with hieroglyphics all over its surface. The shrine's message declares:

EL-ARISH: The land was in great affliction. Evil fell on this earth... It was a great upheaval in the residence... Nobody left the palace during nine days, and during these nine days of upheaval there was such a tempest that neither the men nor the gods could see the faces of those next [to them].

With the plague of locusts covering the skies and earth proceeding the plague of darkness, of three days, undoubtedly the Egyptians counted nine days as the total length of the time of impaired vision and light. Even the Jewish Midrash books explain the plague lasted seven days—during the first three days one could still change his position, but during the next three (the three of the Bible) one could not stir from his place!

The Tenth Plague

The final, culminating plague upon ancient Egypt has not been fully understood. The last night before the Exodus, we know, the LORD slew the firstborn of the Egyptians, but the Israelites who had the blood of a lamb over their front doorposts were spared. But let us notice this account more fully.

EXODUS 12:29 And it came to pass at midnight the LORD STRUCK all the firstborn in the land of Egypt from the firstborn of Pharaoh ... to the firstborn of the captive that *was* in the prison, also all the firstborn of livestock.

EXODUS 12:30 And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants, and all the Egyptians. And there was a GREAT CRY in Egypt, for *there was* not a house where there was not one dead.

What was this awesome plague which destroyed everywhere, throughout the land, causing the death of multiple thousands, including cattle?

The Hebrew word for “smote” is *no gaf* and is used for a violent blow, such as the thrusting with horns by an ox. Now notice the Papyrus Ipuwer account of this traumatic event.

PAPYRUS 4:3, 5:6 Forsooth, the children of princes are dashed against the walls.

PAPYRUS 6:12 Forsooth, the children of princes are cast out in the streets.

PAPYRUS 6:3 The prison is ruined.

PAPYRUS 2:13 He who places his brother in the ground is everywhere.

PAPYRUS 3:14 It is groaning that is throughout the land, mingled with lamentations.

What happened? The evidence indicates that during this final night of the Passover, a great earthquake struck Egypt, killing those God had marked for death all over the land, from the houses of princes to those lying in prisons, and even livestock. The Church historian Eusebius quotes an ancient source in a book by Artapanus which tells of “hail and earth quake by night (of the last plague), so that those who fled from the earthquake were killed by the hail, and those who sought shelter from the hail were destroyed by the earthquake. And at that time all the houses fell in, and most of the temples.”

This must have been a massive earthquake! It must have been a forerunner of the final earthquake and hail which will culminate the “seven last” plagues mentioned in the Book of Revelation (see Rev. 16:17 -21). The Ipuwer Papyrus says:

PAPYRUS 4:4, 6:14 Forsooth, those who were in the place of embalmment are laid on the high ground.

A legend in the Haggada tells that in the last night, when Egypt was smitten, the coffin of Joseph was found lying on the ground, lifted out of the grave. Earthquakes in modern times have been known to have similar effects, causing coffins to protrude from their graves in hillside cemeteries.

God smote strong and weak alike, just as an earthquake would do. The Midrashim say that “as many as nine tenths of the inhabitants have perished” (Ginzberg, *Legends*, II, 369).

God judged ancient Egypt. If this Judgment caused nine tenths of the population to perish, then indeed it was a TYPE of the future destruction God will wreak upon this earth during these “last days,” in our lifetime! In the future “time of trouble” we find that only a tenth of the population shall survive (Isaiah 6:13). God will overthrow the land as He did Sodom and Gomorrah (Amos 4:11). Only ten percent of the population of the nations comprising modern “Israel” shall escape death (Amos 5:3). This same figure can be extended to the judgment of the Gentiles, also, who will be judged and found wanting by God (compare Isa.10:18-19; Isa. 47:1-9; Rev. 18; Isa. 24:6).

Revolt of the Slaves

The Papyrus Ipuwer continues its amazing parallel with the book of Exodus. As Israel prepares to leave Egypt, we read:

EXODUS 11:2 ... let every man ask (demand) from his neighbor, and every woman from her neighbor, articles of silver, and jewels of gold.

PAPYRUS 3:2-3 (gold and jewels) are fastened on the neck of female slaves.

EXODUS 12:33 And the Egyptians were urging the people, that they might send them out of the land quickly, for they said, “We *are* all dead men.”

PAPYRUS 4:2 Forsooth, great and small say: I wish I might die.

PAPYRUS 5:14f. Would that there might be an end of men, no conception, no birth! Oh, that the earth would cease from noise, and tumult be no more!

The Papyrus describes men fleeing the cities in tents, even as Israel fled Egypt and abode in tents as they journeyed.

PAPYRUS 10:2 Men flee... Tents are what they make like the dwellers of the hills.

The Scriptures show that a “mixed multitude” of Egyptians fled Egypt with the Israelites (Exo. 12:38). Their first brief stopover was at a place called “Succoth,” which, in Hebrew, means “tents” or “huts.”

As Israel left Egypt, God went before them. We read:

EXODUS 13:21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud to lead them in the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light to go by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night...

PAPYRUS 7:1 Behold, the fire has mounted up on high. Its burning goes forth against the enemies of the land.

But as Israel left Egypt with a high hand, what happened to the Pharaoh? The Ipuwer Papyrus only records that the Pharaoh was lost under unusual circumstances “that have never happened before.” The Egyptian eye-witness to the plagues lamented his fate, in the broken lines which are still discernible:

PAPYRUS 7:1-2 ... weep ... the earth is ... on every side... weep ...

After this destruction, chaos reigned in Egypt. There was no longer any authority in the land. Mob rule prevailed. Brigands and thugs seized what they could carry. Plunderers looted the royal storehouses. Ipuwer records:

PAPYRUS 6:9 Forsooth, the laws of the judgment-hall are cast forth. Men walk upon (them) in the public places.

PAPYRUS 10:3 The storehouse of the king is the common property of everyone.

PAPYRUS 8:14 Behold, the chiefs of the land flee.

PAPYRUS 9:2 Behold, no offices are in their (right) place, like a frightened herd without a herdsman.

PAPYRUS 6:7 Forsooth, public offices are opened and their census-lists are taken away.

Invaders appeared on the horizon—the Hyksos attacked Egypt, after their encounter with the Israelites in the desert of Sinai. Egypt was helpless, prostrate before them.

PAPYRUS 3:1 Forsooth, the Desert is throughout the land. The nomes (official records center) are laid waste. A foreign tribe from abroad has come to Egypt.

PAPYRUS 15:1 What has happened? —through it is to cause the Asiatics to know the condition of the land.

PAPYRUS 14:11 Men—They have come to an end for themselves. There are none found to stand and protect themselves.

PAPYRUS 12:6ff. Today fear—more than a million of people. No seen—enemies—enter into the temples—weep.

Appendix: A further eyewitness

The Ermitage papyrus is now preserved in the museum at Leningrad. This inscription also tells of a time when Egypt was exposed to some terrific catastrophe. One sees here again a reference to the situation that occurred at the time of the Exodus. The inscription in part reads:

"The land is utterly perished and nought remains. Perished is this land... The sun is veiled and shines not in the sight of men. None can live when the sun is veiled by clouds..." "The river is dry (even the river) of Egypt." "The earth is fallen into misery ... Bedouins pervade the land. For foes are in the East [side of sunrising] and Asiatics shall descend into Egypt." "The beasts of the desert shall drink from the rivers of Egypt... This land shall be in perturbation. .

"I show thee the land upside down, happened that which never (yet) had happened..." "Men laugh with the laughter of pain. None there is who weepeth because of death." "None knoweth that midday is there; his [sun's] shadow is not discerned..."

Evidently the darkness of the 9th plague was a phenomenon which continued intermittently and locally throughout the experience of the Exodus and afterward as reflected in the Ermitage Papyrus inscription and in the statements of Exodus 13:21, 22; 14:20.

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light: to go by day and night. He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people... And it [the pillar of cloud] came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these so that the one came not near the other all the night...

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