

heart toughened, and he did not send off the Israelites, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.

- 1 CHAPTER 10 And the LORD said to Moses, "Come into Pharaoh, for I Myself have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants,
 2 so that I may set these signs of Mine in his midst, and so that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son how I toyed with Egypt, and My signs that I set upon them, and you shall know that I am the LORD."
 3 And Moses, and Aaron with him, came into Pharaoh, and they said to him, "Thus said the LORD, God of the Hebrews: 'How long can you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Send off My people, that they may worship Me.
 4 For if you refuse to send off My people, look, I am about to bring tomorrow
 5 locust in all your territory. And it will cover the eye of the land, and one will

CHAPTER 10 1. *for I Myself have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants.* This is the first time that God informs Moses before his audience with Pharaoh that He has hardened (once again, the literal sense is "made heavy") the heart of the Egyptian monarch. This is a signal that the elaborate toying (verse 2) with Egypt is approaching endgame: Pharaoh is showing himself ever more fiercely recalcitrant, and the plagues are becoming more fearful as we draw near the last plague which will break Pharaoh's will.

2. *so that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son.* The rationale of establishing God's enduring fame shifts here from the global scope of Exodus 9:16 ("that My name will be told through all the earth") to a consideration of educating the future nation. Confirming the LORD's supremacy throughout the world might be viewed as a kind of monotheistic ideal, though not a very realistic one. The particular importance of the Exodus story is that it served as the foundational narrative for the nation.

3. *How long can you refuse to humble yourself before Me?* These words are a translation into other terms of the just announced hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God, and thus constitute a strong indication that events caused by God and events flowing from human will, or willfulness, are merely different biblical ways of accounting for the same phenomenon. It should be noted that the language God directs to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron has become more confrontational: now Pharaoh is inveighed against not only for blocking Israel from fulfilling its obligations to God but for failing to humble himself before God—humble submission being the last thing the supreme monarch of Egypt would imagine he would ever have to do.

4. *locust.* The Hebrew, like this translation, uses a collective noun. In verse 6, when the narrator wants to emphasize the multiplicity of the locusts invading every nook and cranny of Egypt, he switches to a plural verb.

5. *it will cover the eye of the land.* This striking Hebrew metaphor seems worth preserving in English. The Hebrew 'ayin, which has the primary meaning of "eye," obviously suggests something like "surface," "aspect," or "look" in this context. It is a linguistic usage common to many languages in which the object of the organ of perception shares a designation with

not be able to see the land. And it will consume the rest of the remnant left you from the hail, and it will consume every tree you have growing in the field. And they will fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and the houses of all of Egypt, the like of which your fathers did not see nor your fathers' fathers from the day they were on the soil until this day.' " And he turned and went out from Pharaoh's presence. And Pharaoh's servants said to him, "How long will this fellow be a snare to us? Send off the men, that they may worship the LORD their god. Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?" And Moses, and Aaron with him, were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, "Go, worship the LORD your god. Just who is going?"

the organ of perception. The cloud of locusts is so thick ("very heavy," as in verse 14, still another instance of heavy disaster answering the heaviness/hardness of Pharaoh's heart) that it covers the whole surface, or eye, of the land, in effect, blinding Egypt. This image, of course, makes the plague of locusts adumbrate the next plague, darkness, a link that becomes explicit in verse 15, "and the land went dark."

6. *the like of which your fathers did not see nor your fathers' fathers.* Several commentators have noticed that this is a neat antithesis to "your son and your son's son" of verse 2. More important, however, is that this sentence, like the one in verse 14, amplifies the grand drumroll of pronouncements begun in the previous chapter that declare that the catastrophe about to descend is unequaled in all the long annals of Egyptian history.

7. *How long will this fellow be a snare to us?* The impatient "how long" of Pharaoh's courtiers, in the elegant symmetry of the narrative, echoes God's words in verse 3, "How long can you refuse to humble yourself before Me?" Pharaoh persists in his arrogance, but the Egyptian united front against Israel is visibly coming apart at the seams as the courtiers, who have ample reason to believe the direness of Moses's latest threat, try to tell their king that Egypt is on the brink of total disaster. "This fellow" reflects the indicative pronoun *zeh*, "this one," which is often used in biblical Hebrew to express contempt.

8. *And Moses, and Aaron with him, were brought back to Pharaoh.* Moses, after concluding his annunciation of the impending plague of locusts, had turned on his heels and left—the clear implication being that he was rebuffed by Pharaoh, or did not for a moment expect a positive response from Pharaoh. Now, after the courtiers conclude their rebuke to Pharaoh with "Do you not yet know that Egypt is lost?," the Egyptian king appears to concede the justice of their argument and has Moses and Aaron brought back into his presence. It is noteworthy, however, that Pharaoh's agency, coerced and grudging, is left rather vague by the passive construction ("were brought back")—presumably, Pharaoh issued the order, but perhaps he merely acquiesced as his courtiers sent after Moses and Aaron.

Go, worship the LORD your god. His acceptance of their petition expresses itself in an impatient imperative, quite in keeping with the "How long will this fellow be a snare" of his courtiers.

Just who is going? The literal meaning of the Hebrew is "Who and who are going?" Pharaoh's agreement to Moses's request is immediately followed by this question that clearly implies he is not prepared to have the entire people leave.

- 9 And Moses said, "With our lads and with our old men we will go. With our sons and with our daughters, with our sheep and with our cattle we will go, for it is a festival of the LORD for us." And he said to them, "May the LORD be with you the way I would send you off with your little ones! For evil is before your faces. Not so. Go, pray, the men, and worship the LORD, for that is what you seek." And he drove them out from Pharaoh's presence.
- 12 And the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locust, that it may come up over the land of Egypt and consume all the grass of the land that the hail left behind." And Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the LORD drove an east wind into the land all that day and all the night. When it was morning, the east wind bore the locust. And the locust went up over all the land of Egypt, and settled, very heavy, over all the territory of Egypt. Before it there had never been locust

9. *With our lads and with our old men . . . with our cattle we will go.* Moses, at this point fully confident that God has dealt him the stronger hand, responds to Pharaoh's implied reservation uncompromisingly. In a reversal of their initial speech postures, it is now Pharaoh who speaks in brief, unadorned sentences, and it is Moses who deploys quasipoetic parallelism—lads and old men, sons and daughters, sheep and cattle—in a rhetorical flourish that makes it plain he will yield in nothing.

10. *May the LORD be with you the way I would send you off with your little ones.* The effect is sarcasm: that is, as much as I am prepared to send off your little ones may the LORD be with you—which is not at all.

For evil is before your faces. These words are ambiguous. The most likely meaning is "You are headed for mischief"—i.e., embarked on a scheme to escape with all the Hebrew slaves—but it could also mean something like "Harm is going to befall you." Some commentators have detected in the word for mischief/harm/evil, *ra'ah*, a pun on the name of the Egyptian deity Re or Ra.

11. *the men.* The word used here, *gevarim*, is a different one from *'anashim*, the one used by the courtiers in verse 7. It has a stronger connotation of maleness (*'anashim* can also mean "people"), but "males" will not do as an English equivalent because the Hebrew term means adult males, definitely excluding the "little ones."

he drove them out from Pharaoh's presence. Some critics, in an effort to serve logic, emend the Hebrew text to read "they were driven out." But it is not out of keeping with biblical usage to have "Pharaoh's presence" spelled out as the place from which they were driven even though Pharaoh is also the antecedent of the "he" who does the driving. Moses and Aaron were brought back into the court in a passive construction, but now Pharaoh actively and unambiguously drives them out.

13. *an east wind.* The Hebrew idioms were coined in the geography of Canaan, not of Egypt. In Canaan, locusts and parching winds come from the deserts to the east. In Egypt, such winds and blights would typically come from the Sudan, to the south.

like it and after it there never would be. And it covered the eye of the land, 15
 and the land went dark. And it consumed all the grass of the land and every
 fruit of the tree that the hail had left, and nothing green in tree or in grass
 of the field was left in all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh hastened to call 16
 to Moses and to Aaron, and he said, “I have offended before the LORD your
 god and before you. And now, forgive, pray, my offense, just this time, and 17
 entreat the LORD your god, that He but take away from me this death.”
 And he went out from Pharaoh’s presence and entreated the LORD. And 18,19
 the LORD turned round a very strong west wind, and it bore off the locust
 and thrust it into the Sea of Reeds, not a locust remained in all the territory
 of Egypt. And the LORD toughened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not send 20
 the Israelites off.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the heavens, 21
 that there be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness one can feel.”

15. *it consumed all the grass of the land and every fruit of the tree.* In this instance, the account of total devastation would have sounded neither hyperbolic nor miraculous to the ancient audience, who would have had some familiarity with the comprehensive destruction of all growing things that a vast infestation of locusts could effect.

16–17. *I have offended . . . forgive, pray, my offense just this time . . . take away from me this death.* The mastery of dialogue so often manifested in biblical narrative is striking here. Pharaoh’s confident, imperious, aristocratic speech has now broken down into contrite confession and short urgent pleas. The dense layer of consuming locusts, blinding the eye of the land and penetrating every crevice, is given no name by Pharaoh except its palpable meaning for him and his people: “this death.” That choice of name for it, of course, is an unwitting anticipation of the last of the plagues, which will soon come.

19. *west wind.* The literal meaning is “sea wind,” but because of the geographical situation of ancient Israel, “sea” (that is, the Mediterranean) is often used to designate the west. Again, the wind reference reflects the geography of Canaan.

21. *the LORD said to Moses.* As in each third plague in the three triads that make up the sequence of nine, this plague is implemented without warning: the ominousness of three days of total darkness, suddenly enveloping Egypt without advance notice, prepares the ground psychologically for the climactic tenth plague.

a darkness one can feel. The force of the hyperbole, which beautifully conveys the claustrophobic palpability of absolute darkness, is diminished by those who try to provide a naturalistic explanation for this plague (or indeed, for any of the others)—i.e., a desert wind bearing particles of sand and dust darkens the land and makes the darkness palpable. Nor would solar eclipse work as an explanation, since the darkness persists for three days. Although elements of nature are used in all of the plagues—except, perhaps, this one and the next—they are all emphatically presented as extraordinary interventions by God in the order of nature, “signs and portents” that demonstrate His power over the created world.

22 And Moses stretched out his hand over the heavens and there was pitch-
 23 dark in all the land of Egypt three days. No one saw his fellow and no one
 rose from where he was three days, but all the Israelites had light in their
 24 dwelling places. And Pharaoh called to Moses and said, "Go, worship the
 LORD. Only your sheep and your cattle will be set aside. Your little ones,
 25 too, may go with you." And Moses said, "You yourself too shall provide
 us sacrifices and burnt offerings, that we may do them to the LORD our
 26 God. And our livestock, too, shall go with us, not a hoof shall remain.
 For from it we shall take to worship the LORD our God, and we ourselves
 cannot know with what we shall worship the LORD our God until we
 27 come there." And the LORD toughened Pharaoh's heart and he did not
 28 want to send them off. And Pharaoh said to him, "Go away from me.
 Watch yourself. Do not again see my face, for on the day you see my
 29 face, you shall die." And Moses said, "Rightly have you spoken—I will
 not see your face again."

23. *No one saw . . . no one rose.* Abraham Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides both shrewdly infer that this total incapacity through darkness would logically have had to include the disabling of candlelight as well as sunlight—another manifestation of the miraculous character of the event.

but all the Israelites had light in their dwelling places. This previously reiterated opposition between the Israelites and the Egyptians is here made boldly schematic, as the dramatic manifestation of God's miraculous intervention. The contrast between light in Goshen and terrifying darkness in the rest of Egypt then sets the stage for the distinction between life for the Israelites and death for the Egyptians in the tenth plague.

24. *Only your sheep and your cattle will be set aside.* Pharaoh now concedes that the children and, implicitly the womenfolk (which some claim are included in the Hebrew term *taf*) may go, but he still wants to keep back the livestock as a material guarantee for the return of the slaves.

25. *You yourself too shall provide.* Moses is at least as uncompromising as in his previous encounter with Pharaoh. His immediate rejoinder to Pharaoh's stipulation about the livestock is that the Egyptian monarch himself will provide the sacrifices. This pugnacious response might nevertheless have allowed Pharaoh momentarily to infer that Moses was agreeing to the condition about leaving the livestock behind. But in his next sentence, Moses vigorously disabuses Pharaoh of this illusion ("not a hoof shall remain").

28–29. *Do not again see my face . . . I will not see your face again.* This is the final squaring-off between these adversaries. No further negotiations are possible, and the scene has now been set for the unleashing of the terrible last plague.