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The LORD Will Bring a Terrible Plague on Your Livestock in the Field

9: 1-7

The LORD will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field **DIG:** Why do you think Pharaoh is so stubborn? What will Egypt lose as their livestock (lifestyle and livelihood) dies? How could this plague have been averted? What does that say about human nature? God's mercy?

REFLECT: How are you like Pharaoh? What would make you bend or break? How could you sustain the loss of your livelihood, food, transportation, or status?

Once again the gods **of Egypt** were rebuked and ridiculed because they worshiped various **animals**. A large number of bulls and cows were considered sacred in **Egypt**. In the central area of the Delta, four provinces chose various types of bulls and cows as emblems. Apis, the bull god of fertility, was considered the sacred animal of the god Ptah. There was only one sacred Apis bull at any one time. But as soon as it died, another was chosen to take its place. The sacred bull was supposed to have been recognized by twenty-eight distinctive marks that identified him as deity and indicated that he was the object of worship. Thus, the second largest temple that **Egypt** ever built was located in Memphis and was dedicated to the worship of the black bull Apis.

The importance of the Apis bull is perhaps best illustrated by one of the more spectacular archaeological discoveries near Memphis in a place that was known for its worship of both Ptah and the sacred Apis bull. On November 13, 1856, an underground stairway was found, leading to a 1,120 foot tunnel that contained sixty-four large burial chambers. Near the center of each burial room was a huge red or black granite sarcophagus approximately twelve feet long and nine feet high, each weighing about sixty tons. In each of these, a sacred, embalmed Apis bull had been buried. The Apis bull was later called Serapis. This underground mausoleum, known as the Serapeum, can still be seen by visitors to **Egypt** even today.

Another deity whose worship would have been affected by the impact of this **plague** was Hathor, the goddess of love, beauty and joy, represented by the cow. The worship of this deity was popular in both Upper and Lower **Egypt**. This goddess was often depicted as a cow suckling the king, giving him divine nourishment. In Upper **Egypt** Hathor appeared as a woman with the head of a cow.¹⁴⁷ Isis, Nut and Bat were three goddesses who were often depicted with the horns and ears of a cow. Because of this, and because **the Egyptians** believed that **Pharaoh** was a living god, the cow came to symbolize the mother of **Pharaoh**.

Other bull cults included Mnevis, a sacred bull worshiped at Heliopolis and associated with the god Ra, and Buchis, the sacred bull of the Hermonthis. In addition, bulls were understood to be the embodiments of the great Egyptian gods Ptah and Ra. These would have been other deities associated with the effects of the plague. Lastly, there was also the ram-god Khnum. Numerous important female deities were pictured as **livestock animals**; Isis, queen of the gods, has cow's horns on her head, and Hathor was given a bovine head for her task of protecting the king.

Therefore, an attack on the bull, the Apis bull, and the cows of **Egypt** would have been especially devastating to the religious cult of **the Egyptians**. **God** was leveling **His** judgments against the awful institution of idolatry that had a hold on **the Egyptians** as well as **the Israelites**. We shall see later that **Isra'el** also was dabbling in idolatry (**32:1-6**).¹⁴⁸

Then ADONAI said to Moses His servant: Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "This is what ADONAI, the God of the Hebrews says, 'Let My people go, so that they may worship Me'" (9:1). The warning was repeated. **Pharaoh** was commanded to let **the Israelites** leave or face serious consequences. Also, the title **the God of the Hebrews** was once again used (**7:16**).



If you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them back, then the hand of God will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field - on your horses and donkeys and camels and on your cattle and sheep and goats (9:2-3). The Hebrew word for **plague** is *deber*, which has the idea of pestilence. While the term is often used of pestilence in general (**Exodus 5:3, Leviticus 26:25, Second Samuel 24:13-15**), it is used here in a special sense of a **plague on cattle (Psalm 78:48)**. Also, it was **the livestock in the field** that were to be affected, not those **animals** in barns or other shelters.

When **the finger of God (8:19)** failed to make an impression on **Amenhotep II, God** turned to **His hand**. Connected with the deliverance of **the Israelites (3:19, 6:1, 9:2 and 13:3)**, **the hand of God** is a common term in **Exodus**, and is normally associated with some mighty act of judgment. This was the first **plague** in which the term was used, and it was the first **plague** that directly caused death. As such, it served as an indication of worse things to come, a pattern of death that ended in the tenth **plague** and the failed crossing of the Red Sea by **the Egyptian** army, both of which include the death of more **animals**.¹⁴⁹ There would be more failures of the false gods of **Egypt** to come.

*The thing that is common to both the fifth and sixth plagues was the fact that in each of them **the animals of the Egyptians** were attacked. Thus, we see again **the Divine hand** in the arrangement and order of these different plagues.*¹⁵⁰

This would have had great economic consequences for **the land of Egypt**. **Donkeys** were depended upon for heavy labor in agriculture. **Camels and horses** were used mainly for transportation. **Cattle** not only provided milk, but were also central to the worship there. In addition, **Pharaoh** owned a great number of **livestock (Genesis 47:6 and 17)**, so the economic losses from this **plague** would have affected him personally.

But ADONAI will make a distinction between the livestock of Isra'el and that of Egypt, so that no animal belonging to the Israelites will die (9:4). The first proof that **God** was the source of this **plague** is the fact that **He** spared **the livestock** of the Hebrews. The second proof was that **God set a time for the plague** to begin. **Aaron** said: **Tomorrow ADONAI will do this in the land (9:5).** **God fixed a time for the start of the plague so that the Egyptians should not argue that it was merely a local outbreak.**

And the next day ADONAI followed through on what **He** had said. **All the**

livestock in the field of the Egyptians died, but not one animal belonging to the Israelites died (9:6). But if **all the livestock died**, how can they be mentioned later **(9:19)**? The writer probably does not expect the reader to take this **all** literally. We must conclude this is nothing more than hyperbole and simply means *most*. In addition, the precise nature of the fifth **plague** itself is not specified, and is not important. The narrative is clearly focused on what *effect* it had on **Egypt's livestock**.

In an act that showed diminished self-confidence, **Pharaoh sent men to investigate** what had happened in Goshen, **and found that not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died. Yet** in spite of that, **his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go (9:7)**. There is a wonderful play on words here. The verb **sent** is in the form of *slb*. **Moses** demanded that **Pharaoh** let **the Israelites go (slb)**. But instead of *sending the Israelites on their way*, **he sends his men to investigate. He** intends to keep **the Israelites** under **his** thumb. **Pharaoh** still would not give in. **The Holy Spirit** describes his stubbornness with irony and even a sense of mockery.¹⁵¹

It may be appropriate at this point to consider how humanity normally views or understands so-called natural disasters. When calamities of nature strike, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or diseases of cattle, people almost always see no reason or source behind the disaster. They regard it as merely a matter of chance - disorder breaking in on the normal order of nature. "Mother Nature" is fickle and cannot be trusted. In other words, there is no purpose or meaning to natural calamities.

However, the Bible teaches something different. At the very heart and foundation of Scripture, is the doctrine of the sovereignty of **God**. What this means is that **God** is **the Master** of all, and **His** will is the cause of all things. Specifically, it is **ADONAI** who is on the throne of the universe, maintaining the creation, directing it and working all things according to His own will and purpose. The biblical picture is that everything that happens in heaven and on earth occurs because of **God's** decree. **Pharaoh** and **the Egyptians** attempted to explain away **the plagues** as not originating with **God**. They looked for other explanations.¹⁵²