

With this commission in hand Moses and Aaron appealed to the pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt to "hold a festival" and to "take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God" (Exod 5:2-3). After the pharaoh's refusal and his imposition of severe hardships on the Israelites, Moses again appealed to the pharaoh to let Israel go "so that they may worship me in the desert" (Exod 7:16). These two refusals brought the plagues of blood (Exod 7:14-24), frogs (8:1-15) and gnats (8:16-19).

When the pharaoh declined the next appeal he was subjected to the plague of flies (Exod 8:20-32). This time he conceded to let the Israelites make sacrifices in the land of Egypt. When Moses pointed out that these offerings would be "detestable to the Egyptians" the pharaoh agreed to let them go if the plague of flies would be lifted. Moses' prayer for this was answered but subsequently the pharaoh reneged on his promise.

Once more the appeal to the pharaoh to let the Hebrews "worship me" is renewed by God through Moses (Exod 9:13-15). Although some of the Egyptian officials "feared the word of the Lord" the plague of hail did not make the pharaoh and his officials willing to release the Israelites.

The pharaoh once again was confronted with the divine command to free the Israelites "so that they may worship me" (Exod 10:1-20). Warned that a locust plague was pending the pharaoh conceded that he would allow the men to go and worship but would keep the women and children as hostages. Moses however insisted that the entire families as well as their flocks and herds should be included "because we are to celebrate a festival to the Lord." Once more the pharaoh refused. When the locust plague devastated the Land of the Egyptians he appealed for prayer and for forgiveness of sin. After the plague was terminated the pharaoh once more refused to let the Israelites go.

Next the plague of darkness settled upon the land of Egypt (Exod 10:21-29). This time the pharaoh conceded that the Israelites with their families could go and "worship the Lord" if they would agree to leave their flocks and herds in Egypt. This time it was explicitly stated that the Israelites needed their flocks and herds for sacrifices and burnt offerings in worshipping God. Again the pharaoh was relentless in his refusal warning Moses that he faced death if he returned to his court again.

After this refusal the divine-human relationship between God and the pharaoh of Egypt reached its climax in the plague of the firstborn (Exod 11:1-10; 12:29-30). Facing the reality of the death of the firstborn in every Egyptian home as well as among all livestock the pharaoh of Egypt summoned Moses and Aaron and urged that the Israelites leave the land of Egypt. He made this last concession so that they could "worship the Lord" with their flocks and herds.

It became quite apparent from the above encounter that worship for the Israelites involved men, women and children, in fact the entire community of Israel. Their possessions were also included since it was from their flocks and herds that they brought their offerings to God. Worship is associated with festivities and festal occasions. Offerings and sacrifices very likely were brought in the context in which the patriarchs made their sacrifices and built their altars. In the book of Exodus altars were not mentioned