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Which Water Was Affected by the First Plague?

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As we read of a triple reference to drinking in this week's Torah portion, how was drinking adversely affected? In fact, the only time that the specific word of לשתות "to drink" is found in the book of Exodus is here; in fact, all three appearances of the word are here (Ex. 7:18, Ex. 7:21, & Ex. 7:24)! Thus, it turns out that drinking is so important in terms of plagues, it is the very first plague.

So, which water was affected by this drinking plague? When we read of the first plague in Exodus 7:14-25, it seems that it might have affected all of the bodies of water, as well as waterways throughout Egypt (Ex. 7:19), although it seems it may have only affected the Nile (7:17-18 and 7:20-21 (cf. 7:24)). So which is it?

Late Second Century Rabbinic Views

Although it may come as a surprise, there's a rabbinic debate about this answer, as we read of two late-second century rabbis debating which waterways were affected by this plague (שמות רבה ט"י"א):

Rabbi Yehudah says: "Only [the water] in the Nile was afflicted."

Rabbi Nehemyah says: "[The water] above and below [the ground] was afflicted; the water of all of Egypt was afflicted with blood."

Rabbi Yehudah said to him: "How do I interpret 'All the Egyptians dug around the Nile' (Ex. 7:24)?

He said to him: "Because the Egyptians were saying that all the water that Moses and Aaron saw were turned into blood, and they would dig to obtain water that their eyes had not seen."

רבי יהודה אומר שבאיור לקו

ורבי נחמיה אומר מלמעלה ומלמטה לקה, וכל מצרים לקו מימיה

אמר לו רבי יהודה ומה אני מקיים ויחפרו כל מצרים סביבת היאר

אמר לו לפי שהיו המצריים אומרים כל המים שהיו רואין משה ואהרן נעשו דם, והיו חופרין להוציא מים לשתות ממה שאין עיניהם רואין.

Which Water(s) Did the Magician-Priests Use?

As the magician-priests were able to turn water into blood (Ex. 7:22), where did they find this water? Was it subterranean water, as perhaps Rabbi Nehemyah suggested? This notion of water above the ground being affected versus subterranean water continued, as Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra suggested (1089-1167) (אבן עזרא על) שמות ז' כ"ב, ד"ה ויעשו כן:

One may ask: If all of the water in Egypt was turned into blood by Aaron, where did the magicians find the water to turn into blood? The answer is: Aaron turned only water that is found above ground into blood. He did not transform any water that was below ground. The magicians dug and brought forth water from beneath the ground and showed that they had turned it into blood.

יש לשאול אם על ידי אהרן נהפכו כל מימי מצרים לדם. אנה מצאו החרטומים מים והתשובה. אהרן לא הפך רק המים שהיו על הארץ לא המים שהיו תחת הארץ. החרטומים חפרו והוציאו מים והראו כי נהפכו לדם

While that is certainly one approach to considering whence the magician-priests sourced the water, another possibility was offered by Rabbi Yoseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor of Orléans (12th century) ר' יוסף (בכור שור שמות ז' כ', ד"ה ויהפכו כל המים אשר ביאור לדם):

It seems to me that the Nile was only turned to blood for an hour. And, at that hour, it congealed, was made into blood, and the fish died and then, it turned back into water. You should know that the Torah does not describe the situation as saying that they could not drink from the Nile on account of the blood, but rather owing to the fish dying and their carcasses rotting and the Nile stank. And the text also states that "the magician-priests did similarly" - what did they do? Behold - it was all blood, even in the vessels, as it says "and in the wood[en vessels] and in the stone [vessels]" (Ex. 7:19). Rather, it was surely only turned into blood for an hour that the water had been turned into blood throughout the entirety of the land of Egypt and then, afterwards, it turned back into water, so that the magician-priests were able to go back and turn the water into blood for an hour. And therefore, the text does not say that they turned the blood back to water, since they saw that it had turned back into water, therefore, "he paid no heed to this" (Ex. 7:22).

נראה לי שלא נעשה היאור דם אך אותה שעה, ובאותה שעה שנקרש ונעשה דם מתה הדגה, ואחר כך נעשה מים. תדע דלא אמר שלא יכלו לשתות מן היאור מפני שהוא דם, כי אם מפני שמתה הדגה, ונסרחה נבלתם, ובאש היאור. וגם אומר שעשו כן החרטומים - מה עשו, הלא הכל דם, אפילו בכלים, כמו שהוא אומר ובעצים ובאבנים (שמות ז' י"ט). אלא ודאי לפי שעה היה דם בכל ארץ מצרים, ואחר כך נהפך למים, ואחר כך חזרו החרטומים והפכוהו כמו כן לדם לפי שעה. ולפיכך לא אמר להם שיהפכוהו למים, אלא כיון שראה שנהפך מיד למים, לא שת לבו לזאת

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Rabbi Bekhor Shor offers a clearly original approach to the transformation of the water into blood as being merely temporary, allowing these magician-priests to turn the water into blood. He also points out something from a close reading of the text, such that the water wasn't non-potable owing to it being blood, but rather on account of the water having been stinking/rotting from all of the dead fish within it (Ex. 7:18 & 7:21).



Midrashim: Only Egyptian Water

Continuing on our quest of considering which water was adversely affected for drinking purposes in this plague, there is a midrashic approach that describes the plague affecting Egyptian water, but not Israelite water (שמות רבה ט"ז:א):

"And in the woods and in the stones" וּבְעֵצִים וּבְאֲבָנִים,
(Ex. 7:19) - The water that they would שְׁהָיוּ הַמַּיִם שְׁשׁוּתוּיִן
drink with a Jew in one vessel, in a עַם יְהוּדִי בְכָלִי אֶחָד
wooden vessel or in a stone vessel, אוּ בְכָלִי עֵץ אוּ בְכָלִי
would be transformed into blood in אֲבֵן דְּהִפְכִין בְּפִיו
his mouth." לְדָם

This is certainly quite a fascinating midrashic move in considering the water in an Israelite's vessel changing into blood in an Egyptian's mouth. Perhaps this consideration is on account of the language of the Egyptians not being able to drink the water.

An even further midrashic move is made by a subsequent rabbi, who further develops this notion (שמות רבה ט"ז:ב):

Rabbi Aveen, the Levite, son of אָמַר רַבִּי אֲבִין הַלְוִי
Rabbi, said: "The Israelites got rich בְּרַבִּי, מִמַּכַּת דָּם
through the plague of blood. How? הַפְּשִׁירוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל,
There would be an Israelite and an כִּיצַד, הַמִּצְרִי וְיִשְׂרָאֵל
Egyptian living in one house with a בְּבַיִת אֶחָד וְהִגִּית
barrel full of water; the Egyptian מֵלֵאָה מַיִם, וּמִצְרִי
would go to fill the jug from it and הֵלֵךְ לְמֵלֵאוֹת הַקִּיתוֹן
it would be filled with blood. The מִתּוֹכָהּ מוּצִיָּאָה
Israelite would drink water from מֵלֵאָה דָם, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל
the barrel, and the Egyptian would שׁוֹתָהּ מַיִם מִתּוֹךְ
say, 'Give me a little water in your הַגִּית, וְהַמִּצְרִי
hand' and he would give him some אוֹמֵר תֵּן לִי בְיָדְךָ
water, but it turned into blood. מַעֲט מַיִם וְנוֹתֵן לוֹ
And he would say, 'You and I both וְנִעֲשֶׂה דָם, וְאוֹמֵר לוֹ
drink from the same platter!' The נִשְׁתָּה אֲנִי וְאַתָּה מִן
Israelite would drink water and the קֶעֶרָה אֶחָת, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל
Egyptian would drink blood, but שׁוֹתָהּ מַיִם וְהַמִּצְרִי
when he would purchase it from an דָּם, וְכִשְׁהִיָּה לּוֹקֵחַ
Israelite with money, he would be מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל בְּדַמַּיִם, הִיָּה
drinking water. From here, the שׁוֹתָהּ מַיִם, מִכָּאֵן
Israelites became rich." הַפְּשִׁירוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Rabbi Aveen, the Levite, son of Rabbi develops this notion of Egyptian water being undrinkable versus Israelite water as being drinkable not only in the same house and same vessels, but then even selling it to the Egyptian, which would somehow ensure the potability and stability of the water remaining as such.

Did the Plague Only Affect Egyptian Water?

While these midrashim perceive this plague as only affecting Egyptians to the point that it mattered in whose vessels (or mouths) the water was being consumed, another approach is to consider that if the water was affected, it would affect all water, no matter who had it, as suggested by Rabbi Ibn Ezra (ד"ה ויחפרו):

Many say that the water was as red רבים אומרים כי המים
as blood in the hands of an היו ביד המצרי אדומים
Egyptian and became clear in the כדם ונתלבנו ביד
hands of an Israelite. If this is so, הישראלי. אם כן למה
then why doesn't the Torah record לא נכתב אות זה
this sign? I believe that the plagues בתורה. ולפי דעתי כי
of blood, frogs, and gnats included מכת הדם והצפרדעים
both Egyptians and Hebrews, for והכנים היתה כוללת
we shall follow Scripture. These המצרים והעבריים. כי
three plagues caused little harm. אחר הכתוב נרדוף.
However, God differentiated ואלה השלש מעט
between the Egyptians and the הזיקו. רק מכת הערוב
Israelites with regard to the שהיתה קשה. השם
swarms, which was a very harmful הפריש בין המצריים
plague. So, too, with regard to ובין ישראל וככה מכת
the plagues of pestilence and hail הדבר והברד בעבור
because of their flocks. This was מקניהם. ולא כן
not the case with the boils and בשחין. ולא בארבה כי
locusts, for they left Egypt. Now as הם יוצאים ממצרים
the Egyptians dug, so did the וכאשר חפרו המצרים
Hebrews dig. כן חפרו העבריים

Rabbi ibn Ezra's approach is rather fascinating, insofar as these plagues not causing much harm, so perhaps the Israelites were also adversely affected by these plagues, including this first plague. Pushing back, heavily, however, was Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1138-1204) in his Judeo-Arabic commentary (רמב"ם משנה אבות ה"ד) (I apologize for not offering his original writing in Judeo-Arabic here):

But the ten miracles that were performed for our ancestors in Egypt are their salvation from the ten plagues and that each of the ten plagues were specifically on the Egyptians and not on Israel. And these are miracles without a doubt. And the language of the Torah in each and every plague is that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought it [only] on the Egyptians. Except for the plague of lice - as [there] it did not make this clear, but it is known that He did not punish Israel. Rather [the lice] were found with [the Israelites as well], but they did not distress them. And so did the sages elucidate. But with the other plagues, the matter was clarified [in the text]. It stated about the blood (Exodus 7:21), "and the Egyptians could not drink water from the river" - a proof that the damage reached them alone.

Maimonides' pushback here is very solid, as he points out that the text does specify that the Egyptians couldn't drink the water. Otherwise, why else would the text articulate that the Egyptians couldn't drink the water if the Israelites also couldn't drink the water?

Conclusion

As drinking is very important, the opening plague that God brought upon the Egyptians directly affected their water-drinking ability. Whether it was only for a moment or for all six days that the Nile - or perhaps other waterways - were adversely affected, clearly, the fish dying in the Nile caused the Nile to be non-potable, which is pretty devastating, as the Nile is very important to Egypt. And while Rabbi ibn Ezra considered the plague to have affected everyone, the predominant view in our tradition is that it only affected the Egyptians.

L'chaim 🍷