

The Waters of Lake Victoria

In the map to the right, we see the Nile River. The Nile flows from the south (the bottom of the map) to the north and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Most of the water that flows into the Nile comes from Lake Victoria (more than 60%), and nearly all of that water flows during the summer months, which is the rainy season around Lake Victoria. Lake Victoria is the second largest freshwater lake in the world, but the area that feeds the lake is relatively small. What this means is that if the countries surrounding Lake Victoria happen to experience a dry year, the size of the Nile River diminishes significantly and the water level in the Nile drops.

What makes this significant is that it almost never rains in Egypt or Sudan. In Luxor, most probably the place where Moses was raised, a rain event is remembered for years. In Cairo, where the pyramids are located, we would consider their definition of a rainfall to be no more than a light misting, by our standards. Consequently, Egypt's existence as a habitable country is entirely dependent on the flow of water in the Nile. Again, if the rainy season does not happen in the region around Lake Victoria, Egypt will dry up, and its people will have to move or die.

In the book of Genesis, we can read the story of Joseph. Joseph, as we remember, was sold as a slave into Egypt, but God blessed him, for he gave Joseph the ability to interpret dreams. When Pharaoh had two dreams involving fat cows and thin cows and plentiful sheaves of wheat compared to blighted ones, Joseph, receiving understanding from God, informed Pharaoh that God was going to give Egypt seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. The weather did not change in Egypt (it's always hot and dry), but it did have to change in the region around Lake Victoria for this to happen. Much of the moisture needed for farming in Egypt came from the flooding of the Nile following the rainy season around Lake Victoria, and for seven years, the moisture was plentiful. However, during the seven dry years, the rainfall around Lake Victoria would have been so low that the Nile did not flood and in the regular season, the river would have been so low as to make irrigation nearly impossible. While the people would have had enough to drink, they would have found it impossible to irrigate their fields. The food supply was in jeopardy, as we read in the book of Exodus.



As we know from the Genesis account, God guided Joseph to advise Pharaoh to collect food during the seven good years so that the people could eat during the seven lean years. Instead of doling that extra food out for free, however, Joseph sold it to the people, and eventually the people were forced to sell their land at fire-sale prices and later themselves to become slaves to Pharaoh just so they could eat. As a result of this good business move, Pharaoh acquired for himself all of the Egyptian farmland, with the exception of the land that belonged to the Egyptian priests, and he became more powerful than ever before.

In these two seven-year periods, God showed his immense power over creation as he changed the weather patterns in the Mideastern part of Africa so that he could save the Israelites from sure starvation, for that is ultimately why God allowed Joseph to be sold into Egypt. God showed his concern for one of Abraham's descendants, Joseph, elevating him to a position of great power in Egypt. But in all of this God set himself up to face an even more powerful enemy, the Pharaoh of Egypt.

In changing the weather patterns around Lake Victoria and by giving Joseph the interpretation of the dreams, God created circumstances for Pharaoh to become a king of immense power. God inadvertently built up Pharaoh's power through these events, a rather unwise military move, for most heads of armies try to weaken their foe before they attack. But even though he as strengthened, Pharaoh did not stand a chance, for when God went head-to-head against Pharaoh in battle, he roundly defeated him through a series of ten plagues. Though Joseph's God-led actions gave Pharaoh power and prosperity, God impoverished Pharaoh and Egypt with him by sending plagues that would have ruined the agricultural economy of the nation. Egypt nearly died when God went to work, but Israel was saved. In saving Israel, God also cleared the way for a Saviour of the world to be born years later.

Reflecting on this story, we might wonder how the people around Lake Victoria felt as they experienced these very odd weather patterns. Years of heavy rain followed by years of near drought would have destabilized their lives, and, we can be sure, would have made them wonder why their gods (for they didn't know the Lord) were not controlling things as expected. Then, as now, changing weather patterns cause all sorts of alarm, but in their case, the changing weather patterns had an explanation (which they could not have known): God was at work bringing about salvation not only for his people but for the world. The strangeness of their weather was a result of God doing something in another area of a world, an area that many would never have dreamed existed.

We might wonder why things happen as they do. There are events which seem to have no purpose and no meaning. We might even ask the question: why would God allow this or that to happen? We will probably never have the answer, but we can always trust that our God is at work somewhere doing something for the purposes of moving redemptive history forward. Just as the people living in sub-Saharan Africa could not know the full picture and thus not see how God was working, so we do not always see it. But that does not mean he is not at work. It is because God changed the weather patterns in the region around Lake Victoria that his plan of redemption could go forward and, eventually, the good people of Lake Victoria could be saved. After all, because Joseph saved Israel from starvation and because God released his people from slavery, Jesus was born. And today Jesus is known by many of the people around Lake Victoria.

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