

Moses, Aaron, and the Sorcerers

Exodus 7:8-13

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus, the 7th chapter, and as you turn toward Exodus 7, verse 8, you might want to sneak a peak back at Exodus 6:10, through 7:7 and remind yourself of what we studied last. It's been a month since we've been in Exodus together, so let's refresh our memories. In Exodus 6:10 through 7:7 the passage we last studied, we said that we were looking at a turning point in the Exodus story. The great contest between God and Pharaoh was about to begin. In fact, the passage tonight gives us the commencement of that contest between the Lord and Pharaoh. But as we looked at Exodus 6:10 through 7:7 two or three things stood out to us. The first was this. Though Moses was himself experiencing discouragement, the people had rejected him, the foreman had rejected him, even when God had given him an encouraging word to speak to the people of Israel; they had turned their backs on him. And then to boot, God tells him, "By the way, Moses, when you go with this message that I'm sending you with now to Pharaoh, he is going to reject it. Now go tell Pharaoh all these things, but he's not going to listen to a word you say. And yet we saw that God's purpose was to glorify Himself even in the rejection of His word. And so Moses' job was to be faithful in delivering that word. The reaction was not Moses' responsibility. That's up to God, but he was to be faithful in delivering that word.

Then we saw Moses' genealogy reminding us that God has been planting his redemption of his people for generations. It may now just begin in dawn on them what God is doing. It may just now begin to dawn on them that God cares about them. But even in the recording of the genealogy, we are reminded that God has for generations been laying into place this plan to bring His people out of Egypt.

And then finally at the end of the passage, we are reminded that God will show that He is the Lord in the Exodus. His purpose is to display the fact that He is Lord, not only to Israel, but also to Egypt. The Egyptians will know that He is Lord. When it is all said and done, they will know that He is Lord. They may not accept it, but they will know that He is Lord. So the whole purpose of this challenge that is going on in the passage before us will be to display the Lordship of God, the sovereignty of God. That brings us to Exodus, chapter 7, verse 8, the commencement of the final conflict between God and pharaoh. This is God's

word for you. Hear it expectantly.

Now, the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, "When Pharaoh speaks to you saying, 'Work a miracle.' Then you shall say to Aaron, take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent." So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the Lord had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts. For each on threw down his staff and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them as the Lord had said.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

O Father, You are sovereign. Display that to us in Your word tonight and encourage our own hearts in the midst of the struggles and trials and tribulations of this fallen world. Remind us that You will show your Lordship, and You will put at abeyance all that which is aligned against Your people. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Exodus 7, verses 8 through 13 is critical for understanding everything that is going to follow it in the plague stories. In fact Exodus 7: 8-13, gives you a paradigm through which to understand all that is going to happen in the plague stories. The incident involving Moses and the sorcerers and this sign of the serpents, and the cross of the Red Sea actually are the beginning and the end of a specific section in the book of Exodus. Those two events mark off that section. In fact, we are going to see in just a few moments we are going to see some of the direct connections between this passage and Exodus 7 and two or three passages in Exodus 14 and 15 where words are again repeated which are found only here and there. At any rate, Exodus 7, the verses 8 through 13 also defines for us the main issue that is at stake in the plague stories, and in the larger event of the exodus itself. And we see that it is not primarily Moses verses pharaoh that is the great theme, nor is it Moses verses the magicians. Nor is it Israel verses Egypt. It is God verses pharaoh. Or if we could pull back to the Revelation, chapters 11 through 22, it is God verses Satan. What we are seeing is a challenge between the one true God, the God of Israel, and the deities of Egypt, being unfolded before us, even in this passage. As such, the real question, the great theme that is at stake in the great Exodus struggle is who is the one true God? Who is sovereign over the operation of the universe? Whose will come to pass in heaven and on earth. That is the great theme which is being recycled through this passage. I'd like you to see two or three manifestations of it in the passage tonight.

I. God reveals His sovereignty to the Egyptians.

First, if you'd look at verses 8 through 10. Here we see the Lord squarely set over against Pharaoh, and He instructs Moses and Aaron to give a sign and a demonstration of His power to Pharaoh, and in those few verses we learn that God is purposing to reveal His sovereignty to the Egyptians. Not only to the Israelites, but to the Egyptians in the Exodus. The passage, if you look at verse 8, begins with the Lord's instructions to Moses and Aaron. He tells them precisely what He wants them to do at their next meeting with Pharaoh. And the deed that He calls on them to perform is a frontal assault upon Egypt and upon the sovereignty of Pharaoh.

I can scarcely think of an illustration which is more blunt or as blunt and direct as this sign, as this demonstration would have been to the Egyptians. Perhaps you remember in the days before the Gulf War, or perhaps the days of unrest in Iran after the fall of the Shah. Seeing people in the streets burning American flags in Iraq or Iran, given the various circumstances, chanting death to the great Satan, threats to send Americans back in body bags. You can't imagine the kind of animosity that was being generated toward the United States. And in that animosity, the way that it was expressed was to take a symbol of America and degrade it on worldwide television as a way of expressing defiance towards the United States. Well, let me say that that's child's play compared to what God asks Moses and Aaron to do to pharaoh in that passage. But more on that in just a few moments.

Moses, you remember, has been given three signs to perform. As far as we know the only one of those signs that He performs before pharaoh is this sign. The sign of the rod which is cast down, becoming a serpent, the serpent which is taken up and being restored to the rod. And you're going to see there's a reason why that may be the only sign. As far as we know, the second sign, the water turned into blood, becomes the second plague. And the third sign, the sign with reference to the plague of the skin, that sort of skin disease that Moses manifested when he sticks his hand inside his cloak, and then he brings it back out with a skin disease. And then when he returns his hand, it's cleansed. Perhaps this manifests itself in the plague with regard to disease. At any rate, it is primarily, as far as we know, only this sign which is displayed before Pharaoh.

Why, why the sign of the rod becoming a serpent? Why is that sign chosen to perform before pharaoh? Because in the activity of changing that staff into a snake, Moses and Aaron, and, of course, Moses and Aaron are only the spokesmen of God. God is directly attacking Pharaoh and his people at the heart of their beliefs. How, you ask? Let me suggest three ways.

First, many of you know that on the front of Pharaoh's crown was an enraged female cobra, a serpent, a symbol of the goddess of lower Egypt. This symbol

was thought by the Egyptians to possess divine and magical power, and so when Aaron throws down the rod which becomes a snake, he is directly challenging the authority of Pharaoh, whose authority was symbolized in this serpent creature. And so we see the very symbol chosen as a way in which God is challenging Pharaoh's sovereignty.

Secondly, casting down a rod is described over and over in Egyptian, mythological ritual. You find in text throughout the second millennium, those who have the power to change inanimate objects into animals, who have the power to make wax crocodiles into real crocodiles. In Exodus 7, God, through His servants Aaron and Moses, does what Egyptian magicians can only dream of doing. He manifests His sovereignty over inanimate objects and over animal creation. The Egyptians practice, like many like many occultists today, sympathetic magic. They believe there was some sort of a sacred, spiritual, magical relationship between symbols and the real thing. God manifests His power over both in this passage. The sovereignty of God.

Thirdly, the serpent was considered a wise and magical creature in Egypt. Wadjet, who was the goddess of lower Egypt is represented as a snake. In fact, it is her symbol which is found on the crown of the Egyptian Pharaoh. Once upon a time, upper Egypt and lower Egypt were separate countries. Lower Egypt was eventually captured by upper Egypt, and when that happened the Pharaoh assimilated the goddess of lower Egypt into his own crown. And so that symbol became a sign of Pharaoh's sovereignty and power. But additionally, you need to know that Apopis, who is an enemy of the gods in Egyptian methodology, is often pictured in the form of a snake, and it represents the forces of chaos arraigned against Egypt. Clearly then, in the throwing down of this rod snake, God, the Lord of Israel, is challenging the gods of Egypt. The Lord is challenging Pharaoh's authority. He's mocking his magic. And indeed in a few moments we will see Him trump his magic. And all that we are seeing set up in verses 8 through 10 is God's purpose to reveal his sovereignty to Pharaoh.

II. Pharaoh's attempts at rebuttal of the purposes of God are/will be futile.

Then if you look at verses 11 and 12 you'll see a second thing. Here Pharaoh strikes back. Something very offensive has been done to Pharaoh. In fact I think it's almost one of the miracles of this passage that Moses and Aaron weren't killed on the spot for doing what they did. I think you have to write that off as the protected providence of God that they were spared. They did something as offensive as you possibly could have done in the presence of Pharaoh. Let's take those scenes from Iran and Iraq, and transport those into the oval office. The burning of a flag in the presence of the President of the United States. That's the kind of thing that gets you tried for treason. Moss and Aaron have done this and now Pharaoh retorts, and we see his attempts at rebuttal of the purposes of God, and we see that they are and will be futile. Remember this passage not only

gives us the main themes of the contest between God and Pharaoh, it foreshadows the outcome of the contest between God and Pharaoh. Pharaoh strikes back and he instructs his wise men to duplicate Moses' miracle. But in the end, they are foiled. Look at verse 11.

Pharaoh in his cynicism immediately calls for his own magicians to duplicate Moses and Aaron's feat. And we are told that they did so. Perhaps they did it by slight of hand. We are told that there are still snake charmers in Egypt today who can take certain types of cobras, pinch a nerve in the upper part of their neck and paralyze them, and then through chanting and incantations keep them in a catatonic state until they throw them down again, and they wriggle back to life. Now I've never seen this, but every commentator I read refers to this. I'm not sure I want to see it, at least up close. But I'm told that there are tricksters in Egypt that can still do these things today. Moses in the text doesn't indicate that this was necessarily slight of hand. He doesn't give indication that this is any other thing than occult powers being waged back against Moses.

But whether by slight of hand or occult powers, we don't know, it doesn't matter much to the flow of the story because the main focus is on the final phrase of verse 12. After the Egyptian lector priest, these magicians who were not only vested with magical powers, but with responsibility to teach the secret wisdom of Egypt to a next successive generations of priests. After they have duplicated Moses' feat, we are told that Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Something amazing happens and the snakes of the Egyptians magicians are swallowed up. At least three things are going on when that happens.

First of all, obviously 'swallowing up' is a sign of conquest in victory. We even use that kind of language to describe conquests of one nation by another. They swallowed them up. In fact in Egyptians text talks about Pharaoh swallowing up lower Egypt, when he conquered lower Egypt to make it part of the United realm. When we see that language of swallowing up we see God's forecast to Pharaoh to what He will do to him.

Secondly, and even more than this, in Exodus 15, verse 12. Would you turn there. In Exodus 15 verse 12, As the song of Moses is being sung after the victory of Israel over Egypt at the Red Sea after the destruction of the army of Pharaoh in the Red Sea, we are told, "Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand and the earth swallowed them." This is the only other time that the verb 'swallow' is used in this narrative. God is forecasting, in the swallowing up of the rod, staff snakes of the Egyptians, the swallowing up of the army of Egypt at the Red Sea.

Thirdly, notice that the staff that swallows the snakes will be the staff which is stretched out over the Red Sea to bring the Red Sea crashing over and swallowing up the army of Egypt. Even the passage we just read in Exodus 15:12 speaks of stretching out the right hand. What was in the right hand? The staff of God. So the staff of Moses here swallows up the snakes of the priests of

Egypt, and that same staff will be used to bring the waters of the Red Sea crashing down upon the Egyptian army. That same point is made in Exodus 14, verses 16 and 26. The Lord is seen here not merely challenging Pharaoh's authority, not merely challenging Pharaoh's magic, but trumping his magic and forecasting what is going to happen in the conflict between Israel and Egypt to come. God is sovereign. The Lord reigns. He is going to show that he is Lord and even Pharaoh's attempts to rebut that Lordship will prove to be futile. The Lord reigns.

III. Even Pharaoh's sight of a miracle, with an obvious message, does not change his heart.

One last thing. Look at verse 13. "Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he did not listen to them as the Lord had said." Even Pharaoh's sight of a miracle, a miracle which, as we've already indicated, whose message he would have understood. God's message is in neon lights flashing in front of Pharaoh's eyes. "Pharaoh, you get in my way, and I will wipe you out. I will show you how sovereign I am." Even in the face of that miracle, even in the face of that message, Pharaoh does not change his heart. Now this is a rich, single verse with a number of themes for us to contemplate. Two or three things to think about.

First, Pharaoh's heart is unyielding before the display of God's power and his warning of repentance. And Pharaoh functions in at least two levels in this history. Let's think of Him first as the unyielding sinner. Pharaoh is given a revelation. But of course Pharaoh demands a revelation first. God in his mercy gives him a revelation. God in His mercy gives him a demonstration of His power. But He not only gives him a demonstration of His power, He gives him a demonstration of what will happen if pharaoh remains recalcitrance against Him.

And Pharaoh rejects. Can you think of a better picture of the truth that only the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit can change the heart of a sinner than that? What more could God have done? Pharaoh, here's my power. Pharaoh, watch how I am able to treat with contempt the greatest occult powers of your magicians. Pharaoh, look at the message which is entailed in the staff swallowing up your physician's staff's snakes. And yet Pharaoh's heart is unyielding. The greatest miracle in the world cannot change a human heart. Only the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit can do that. That's something that we should never, ever forget as we bear witness in an increasingly hostile age, an age hostile to evangelical Christianity.

But Pharaoh functions at another level in this story as well. Pharaoh is the symbol and representative of the Satanic forces which are arrayed against God's people. Look, Moses' people have already heard him read Genesis to them. And it is not lost on them that the key antagonist in this story wears a serpent on his

forehead. They know what Moses said about the great hero who will come and crush the serpent under His feet. Furthermore, Pharaoh will be pictured throughout the prophetic literature of the Old Testament as a snake. Let me give you an example. Turn with me to Ezekiel, chapter 29. In Ezekiel, chapter 29, verse 3, God tells Ezekiel to say this, to prophesy this. "Speak and say thus says the Lord God. Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great monster that lies in the midst of his rivers that has said, 'My Nile is mine, and I Myself has made it.'" The word used there for *great monster* is the same word used in this passage for *snake*. Pharaoh is pictured as the personification of this snake whose power is arrayed against the people of God. If I could carry that forward into the New Testament, and especially to the book of Revelation in a passage that we are approaching in Derek's Wednesday night studies. Think of the great dragon who awaits to devour the fruit of the woman's womb. But before we even get there, the passage that we studied this past Wednesday night in Revelation 8 and 9, these awesome pictures of end time catastrophes, catastrophic numbers of warriors, and Derek said to us, "The point of this is not to focus upon some army that's coming some day. The point is to show us the forces of hell arrayed against the people of God." We are so often not mindful of them. Job never knows that the contest going on in his life is ultimately a contest between God and Satan. There's a battle in the heavenlies going on over Job. John is telling us in Revelation 8 and 9, my friends the whole of the forces of hell are arrayed against you, and they will not prevail.

And that's exactly what we are being told here in Exodus, chapter 7. Pharaoh is the symbol of Satan's opposition to the people of God. And in God's redeeming work, He not only redeems His people out of the pit, but He destroys all the forces that are arrayed against Him. The Lord's work of redemption includes not only purchasing His people at a price, but also His destruction of all the forces arrayed against them and against His rule. Part of that drama, part of that drama of redemption is God's conquest of the powers of darkness, and in Exodus 7 through 11, God's plagues, God's victory over Pharaoh's sorcerers, His sovereignty displayed against the enemies of His people is itself an act of redemption. It is a destructive work of redemption. The towers of God's enemies must be torn down if His people are to be safe and free. And so alongside of His positive work of rescuing His people, there is a corresponding and equally important negative work of shattering the resistance to His rule. And that is why Paul delights to tell you in Ephesians 4 that Christ when He ascends on high leaves captivity captive, and all the principalities and powers are put beneath His feet. He revisits this theme in Colossians as well. In fact, throughout Paul's literature you'll find him speaking to Christ crushing of the powers and principalities arrayed against God and His people. Because the Redeemer must tear down the strongholds which are arrayed against God's people, as well as redeem us out of the pit. And Satan here manifested in the person personified in Pharaoh must be destroyed if God's people are to be free.

There's one last thing we see in this passage. Notice the final words of verse 13,

"As the Lord had said." God has told Moses beforehand, "Pharaoh is going to reject this message that I give to you to give to him. He's not going to yield." God is even sovereign in foreknowledge. He knows that Pharaoh will demand to see a miracle. He gives Moses a miracle to display to him ahead of time. He knows that Pharaoh will reject the miracle and the message. He tells Moses ahead of time, and at the end of this passage He says, "And remember, I told you so." God is sovereign. God is sovereign over against all those things that are arrayed against you and against your salvation. And God will be known as the Lord, one way or another. Who is on the Lord's side? Only by faith in Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before You as the sovereign one. We ask that by Your grace, we would acknowledge Your Lordship willingly. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, by faith, trusting in Jesus who is the saving and conquering Messiah. But we long at the same time, Oh God, for Your Name, and Your sovereignty, and Your Lordship to be displayed throughout the world. Do it, oh Lord, and receive the glory that is due to You alone. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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