

Exodus 7:8-13

I. Exodus 7:8-9 — Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Prove yourselves by working a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.’”

And so it begins. Now that Israel has been 400 years in Egypt, now that the sin and wickedness of the Canaanites is complete, and now that Moses is finally ready for the task after eighty years of preparation – we’re finally ready for what we could call the “main event.” But what, exactly, is the main event? We say, “And so it begins;” but then what we really need to ask is, “And so *what* begins?” These verses, here, are the prologue to what we all know as the Ten Plagues. They’re the introductory act in the drama with the main act still to follow. And as the introductory act (or scene), these verses tell us how we should understand the main act, or what we call the “plagues.” In a sense, they’re really the interpretive *key* to the next nine chapters. They’re meant to show us what the main event really *is*. They’re meant to answer the question, “What is it, really, that’s about to happen?”

We see first of all that Yahweh anticipates Pharaoh’s demand that Moses and Aaron “prove themselves” by working a “miracle.” Moses and Aaron have come to Pharaoh claiming to be representatives of Israel’s God. They have said, “Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel,” and Pharaoh has responded, “Who is Yahweh, that I should obey His voice?” (5:1-2) Pharaoh doesn’t think much of Israel’s God, and Pharaoh especially doesn’t think much of these two no-account, highly unimpressive representatives of a slave-nation’s God. So for Pharaoh to request the “proof” of a miracle is not at all unreasonable. But the reality is that Pharaoh will only request the “proof” *because* he doesn’t expect to get any. Pharaoh won’t be interested in finding anything out, but just in exposing Moses and Aaron as the frauds that he is sure they are. So God, knowing this in advance, tells Moses and Aaron *exactly* what *He* wants them to do. Moses is to tell Aaron to take his staff, and cast it down before Pharaoh that it may become a serpent.

Of course, in chapter four, this is one of the miracles that Moses was to perform for the people of Israel. (4:1-5) Only we saw in chapter four that the turning of the staff into a serpent wasn’t just a miracle; it was a “*sign*.” (4:8-9, 30) It wasn’t just something astonishing, and amazing, and “really cool” – it was meant to send a very specific theological message – it was meant to communicate a very specific truth about God. *Miracles* may only be intended to impress and amaze, and in this case, prove that someone is the “real deal.” And this is all that Pharaoh will demand. But Yahweh will give Pharaoh even more than he asks for. Yahweh will give him a “*sign*.”

II. Exodus 7:10 — So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent.

This verse is worded in such a way that it emphasizes the careful and simple obedience of Moses and Aaron. Back in verse six, this was our first sign that something has fundamentally changed in Moses. Verse six says: “Moses and Aaron did so, they did just as the Lord commanded them.” And now we have a specific example of this careful and simple obedience: “So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded.” And then in order to emphasize this point

even further, Moses goes on to describe the *obedience* in the exact language of the *command*. In verse nine, God tells Moses what he must say to Aaron: “**Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh**, that it may become a serpent.” And now we read: “So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh *and did just as the LORD commanded*. **Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants**, and it became a serpent.”

Why does Moses emphasize his own and Aaron’s obedience? Rather than trying to draw attention to themselves, the point is actually to turn the attention *away* from themselves and *towards God*. In other words, all that Moses and Aaron really did was simply, *obey*. That’s all they did! And it was this very simple, unadorned act of obedience (throwing a staff on the ground) that resulted in this miraculous event – in the *staff* turning into a *serpent*. Moses and Aaron aren’t anyone special. They had no show, no secret formulas, no special props, no muttered incantations. There was no conjuring; there were no magic spells or charms. Verse ten *very carefully emphasizes* that all Moses and Aaron really did was *obey* – with the result that when your run-of-the-mill Moses told your run-of-the-mill Aaron to cast his run-of-the-mill staff on the ground – the staff became a serpent. In the same way, even today God calls run-of-the-mill people like you and me to simply obey Him. And who knows in the end how God plans to use our simple, day in and day out obedience in bringing about great things for His glory.

So Moses and Aaron have given Pharaoh exactly what he asked for, but didn’t expect to get. They have given Pharaoh a miracle that “proves” they have been sent by Yahweh, the God of Israel. What will Pharaoh say to that?

III. Exodus 7:11–12a — Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents.

Can you see the stark contrast with verse ten? Pharaoh is the king of Egypt – in that day, the undisputed superpower of the world. He is supposedly the supreme human representative of the gods, and in some sense even a god himself. Pharaoh is not your everyday, run-of-the-mill man. And Pharaoh’s staff is not your everyday, run-of-the-mill staff. It is fit to be the symbol of his royal power and authority – even his supposedly divine power and authority. And yet for all this, Pharaoh himself is unable to reproduce with his staff what has just happened with the staff of Moses and Aaron! So Pharaoh has to call in the “experts.” If verse ten was intended to emphasize Moses’ and Aaron’s simple act of obedience, then the point of verse eleven is to emphasize how difficult, and complicated, and cumbersome the counterfeit miracle has to be. (cf. Durham) “Then Pharaoh summoned *the wise men* and *the sorcerers*, and they, *the magicians* of Egypt, also did the same *by their secret arts*.” The fact that these men accomplished the same thing as Moses and Aaron is almost completely lost in all the differences. Moses and Aaron have no “secret arts.” Moses and Aaron would not have been recognized by anyone as wise men, or sorcerers, or magicians – not even *after* their staff had turned into a serpent. And yet Aaron’s staff turned into a serpent only as the result of a simple act of obedience to the simple word of God. What a stark contrast to the secret arts of the conjuring magicians!

And yet given the contrast, can we still say that the magician's staffs somehow actually became serpents? There are some commentators who believe that these Egyptian magicians were the kind who use "boxes and curtains, in the usual manner of magicians doing substitution tricks." (cf. Stuart) But Moses says that "each man *cast down* his staff, *and they became serpents.*" Now I think Moses is describing what happened *to all appearances*. In other words, I believe that only God has the power to make a snake out of a staff because only God has the power to create. But certainly Satan must have the power to give *every possible appearance* of a staff actually becoming a serpent. I believe that there is a very *real* power here. But it's a counterfeit power. It's a power that can only *imitate*, and *copy*, and *pretend to be* the real thing. And so *therefore*, if that's the case, it's a power that can only lie, and mislead, and deceive. The Apostle Paul speaks of the "lawless one" who comes by the activity of Satan with "all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing." (2 Thess. 2:8-10; cf. Mat. 24:24; 7:22) So here's a warning to us that signs and wonders are not *in themselves* proof of anything, even if they're performed by professing Christians. (Mat. 7:22; 24:24) A sign and wonder may be a *false* sign and wonder – a powerful imitation of the real thing that's intended only to deceive and destroy.

So now we all have a question, don't we? We know Moses and Aaron didn't mess up, because they've only followed God's instructions. So why did God tell Moses and Aaron to perform a miracle that He knew Pharaoh's magicians would be able to imitate? Why start with such a "small" sign when there were so many "bigger and better" ones that the Egyptians would not be able to copy? Well, first of all, Pharaoh has not *asked* for proof of just *how great* and *powerful* Yahweh is. Pharaoh has only asked for proof that Moses and Aaron are actually the messengers of a god. Aaron's staff turned to a serpent has proven *that* fact beyond all shadow of a doubt.

But second of all, even if Pharaoh denies the evidence, the *imitation* of his magicians is obviously just that – an *imitation* of the true power that accompanies these two lowly Israelites. So even this initial sign is already enough to prove the *superior* power of Yahweh. God gives this sign to Pharaoh because it *is enough*, and because He wants to reveal the true nature of Pharaoh's heart. Clearly, he is not really looking for proof. Clearly, his mind is already closed. In verse fourteen, this is the point that God emphasizes for Moses: "Pharaoh's heart is *hardened*; he refuses to let the people go." In the same way, behind *all* of the world's demands for "proof" are minds that are already closed. The story of Pharaoh is a reminder that we cannot reason anyone into the kingdom with proof or evidence. Only God, in His sovereign grace, can open the mind and change the heart. Our only responsibility is to speak, and proclaim, the living and powerful Word of God. Simple obedience.

Now back in chapter four, the Lord gave two commands to Moses: "Throw [your staff] on the ground," and, after it turned into a serpent, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail." (4:2-4) But here, God has given only the first command. Very conspicuously absent is any command to catch the serpent by the tail. Did God accidentally miss the second half of the sign? "Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents."

IV. Exodus 7:12b — But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.

We shouldn't think that God was surprised by the success of this imitation, and so all of a sudden he had to think of something to "one-up" the magicians. To the contrary. God had planned for this all along. This *is*, in fact, the *main* point. Pharaoh demanded *only* a miracle. But Yahweh has given him a *sign*.

Can you imagine watching the spectacle of one snake swallowing up a group of other snakes, one snake after another snake, after another? One commentator who believes that the magicians had only performed a trick of substitution points out that here was something the magicians could *not* imitate with their magic tricks. (Stuart) But I'm not so sure that's the point! I'm not so sure that the magicians couldn't have imitated this swallowing act *if they had been allowed to try*. But the *reason* their serpents couldn't swallow Aaron's, is because Aaron's serpent swallowed theirs! *That's* the point! Yahweh has given Pharaoh *not only* the miracle that he demanded, but *also* a *sign*.

And anyone in his right mind can see the meaning of this sign – without any hints, or helps, or clues of any kind. For Pharaoh, it should have been frighteningly, terrifyingly obvious. If Pharaoh will not listen and relent, then God will cause the Egyptians themselves to be swallowed up and destroyed. To be swallowed up is used *often* in the Bible as a vivid picture of destruction.¹

- ✓ Lamentations 2:8 (cf. 2:2,5,16) — The LORD... stretched out the measuring line; he did not restrain his hand from **swallowing up**; he caused rampart and wall to lament; they languished together.
- ✓ Psalms 21:9 — You will make them as a blazing oven when you appear. The LORD will **swallow them up** in his wrath, and fire will consume them.

In Exodus, the *only* other time we see the word "swallowed" is in chapter fifteen. After the people of Israel have come safely through the waters of the sea, they will sing and celebrate:

- ✓ Exodus 15:9–12 — The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.' You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand; the earth **swallowed them** [Pharaoh's army].

When Aaron's serpent swallows up the serpents of Pharaoh's magicians, anyone in his right mind can see what this sign means – without any hints, or helps, or clues of any kind. And yet there is still a clue that I believe makes the meaning of this sign even more powerful—first of all for Moses' original audience, but then even more so for us today. When Moses threw his staff down in Exodus chapter four, he says that it became a *nahash*. This is the same word that Moses uses for the serpent that tempted Eve in the garden. (cf. Gen. 3) In just a few verses, the Lord will say to Moses:

¹ Cf. 2 Sam. 20:19-20; Job 2:3; 10:8; Ps. 35:25; 69:15; 124:3; Prov. 1:12; Eccl. 10:12; Isa. 25:7-8; 49:19; Jer. 51:34; Hos. 8:8; Hab. 1:13; Num. 16:30-34

- ✓ Exodus 7:15 — Go to Pharaoh in the morning... and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent [*nahash*].

But here, in these verses, Moses never uses the word *nahash*. Instead he uses the word *thannin*. *Nahash* always refers to a snake, but there are only two other times in the Old Testament where *thannin* might possibly refer to a snake. (cf. Deut. 32:33; Ps. 91:13; but see Isa. 27:1) Otherwise, that word *thannin* is always the word for a great monster. So why does Moses use *thannin*, here, instead of *nahash*? The nations that surrounded Israel (including Egypt) thought of this *thannin*, this *monster*, as the embodiment of all the uncontrollable, chaotic, threatening forces of nature; and so the monster was greatly feared – as though it were a renegade god. But the one true God showed his sovereignty over this “monster” when He conquered it in the **creation** of the world – by bringing order out of the chaos.

- ✓ Psalms 74:13–17 (cf. Gen. 1:2) — You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the **sea monsters** on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You split open springs and brooks; you dried up ever-flowing streams. Yours is the day, yours also the night; you have established the heavenly lights and the sun. You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; you have made summer and winter.²

In the Bible, this monster eventually comes to represent all who would seek to threaten, and attack, and persecute, and destroy God’s people, so that when God brings the **salvation** of His people, He does it by destroying the monster.

- ✓ Isaiah 27:1, 2, 6 — In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the **dragon** (*thannin*) that is in the sea. In that day, “A pleasant vineyard, sing of it!” ... Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.

Here the slaying of the dragon pictures a salvation yet to come, and yet in other places the slaying of the dragon pictures the past salvation of God’s people from their slavery in Egypt.

- ✓ Isaiah 51:9–10 (cf. Ezek. 29:3; 32:2) — Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the **dragon** (*thannin*)? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?

In Ezekiel, Pharaoh himself is described as the monster:

- ✓ Ezekiel 29:3 (cf. 32:2) — Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great **dragon** (*thannin*) that lies in the midst of his streams.”

² It’s possible that in these verses, the Psalmist is combining God’s defeat of the monster in creation with God’s defeat of the monster in redemption (the new creation).

So even here, when Moses describes how Aaron’s “monstrous, dragon-like snake”³ *swallowed up* the monstrous and dragon-like snakes of Pharaoh’s magicians, we see a graphic and vivid picture of God’s absolute power and sovereignty over all who would threaten, and attack, and persecute, and destroy His people. And if we think it strange that the staff of God’s servant should also become a monstrous, dragon-like snake, then we only need to remember that apart from the very end of Deuteronomy (32:33), Moses uses the word *thannin* only one other time.

- ✓ Genesis 1:21 — So God *created* the great *sea monsters* (*thannin*) and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm. And God saw that it was good.

The Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 104:26 — Here is the sea, great and wide... and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.
- ✓ Psalm 148:7 — Praise the LORD from the earth, you great *sea monsters* (*thannin*) and all deeps.

If the “monstrous snakes” of Pharaoh’s magicians represent the mortal enemies of God’s people, then the “monstrous snake” of God’s servant is just one of His creatures that never fails to do His bidding.

Pharaoh has been clearly instructed as to what he must do, the credentials of Moses and Aaron have been verified beyond any doubt, the superiority of Yahweh is now obvious for anyone with eyes to see, and the fearful consequences of resisting have been very graphically and powerfully illustrated for Pharaoh.

V. Exodus 7:13 — Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.⁴

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the enemy is *real* – the enemy that seeks to threaten, and attack, and persecute, and destroy God’s people. We see this all around the world in the hate and hostility directed against Christians and the Church. We see this more and more here in America in politics, in the laws that are being passed, in the media, and in entertainment.

But if the enemy is real, then so also is God’s unqualified, absolute, awesome, breathtaking sovereignty over the enemy. For the next nine chapters, God will not tire of *proving* this truth for all of Egypt, and especially for all of His people, to see. So may we, then, not tire of *seeing* – that we might learn the true fear of the Lord, trusting in Him, and fearing no other.

We said at the beginning, “And so it begins.” And then we asked: And so *what* begins? As the introductory act in the drama, these verses assure us that the plagues (Exod. 11:1) which are now

³ Cf. LXX “*drakon*”; Durham; Craigie

⁴ “God shows his power and Pharaoh resists the obvious conclusion that he is no match for the God of Israel. He should concede victory to Yahweh. But he does not, which will yield disastrous consequences.” (Enns)

to follow are not just plagues. They are—each and every single one—unmistakable *signs* of God’s unqualified, absolute, awesome, breathtaking sovereignty over all those who would oppose and persecute His people.

- ✓ Exodus 10:1–2 (cf. 7:3; 8:23) — Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these *signs* of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what *signs* I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.”

In the New Testament, the Apostle John describes for us what happened when Jesus ascended into heaven after His death, burial, and resurrection from the dead:

- ✓ Revelation 12:7–9 (cf. 20:2) — Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the *dragon*. And the *dragon* and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great *dragon* was thrown down, that ancient *serpent*, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

It’s because the dragon knows, now, that his time is short that he stirs up the nations to persecute God’s people with all the more fury, and hatred, and rage. (12:12; 20:7-8) But in the end, the prophecy of Isaiah will be fulfilled:

- ✓ Isaiah 27:1–2, 6, 12–13 — In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the *dragon* (*thannin*) that is in the sea. In that day, “A pleasant vineyard, sing of it!” ... Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit... In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the LORD will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.