

Exodus 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 7 And the Lord said to Moses, See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land.

But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt, and bring my hosts, my people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment.

The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt, and bring out the people of Israel from among them. Moses and Aaron did so. They did just as the Lord commanded them.

Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh. 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. So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh, and did just as the Lord commanded.

[1 : 1 4] Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh, and his servants, and it became a serpent. 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. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened. He refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out of the water.

Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. And you shall say to him, The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness.

But so far you have not obeyed. Thus says the Lord, By this you shall know that I am the Lord. Behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood.

[2 : 2 4] The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile. And the Lord said to Moses, Say to Aaron, Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over the rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood.

And there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone. Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh, and in the sight of his servants, he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood.

And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts.

So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not even take this to heart.

And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile. Seven full days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile.

[3 : 43] In Exodus chapter 7, we've reached the beginning of the story of the plagues. Moses is still discouraged after the failure of his initial approach to Pharaoh, and the people's refusal to listen to him.

And he feels very keenly his weaknesses at the end of the previous chapter, the fact that he is a person of uncircumcised lips. And God declares that just as he was to be as God to Aaron, speaking to him as God's representative, so he is to be as God to Pharaoh.

With Aaron as his prophet, Moses will speak words that have been given to him by the Lord, but he will speak those words as one who is standing for the Lord, as one who is representing him in a fuller way.

God declares what he is going to do beforehand, so that it is clear that when it happens, he has been in control throughout. God is not just muddling through events, responding to things as they come up.

God knows exactly what he's going to do. He calls the fact that Pharaoh is going to resist, and he makes clear that that has always been part of the plan. The statement made to Pharaoh is more absolute now.

[4 : 51] There's not just a mention of a three days journey into the wilderness to worship. He must let the people go. Pharaoh began by asking, who is the Lord that I should obey his voice.

And now God is going to demonstrate exactly who he is to the Egyptians. God doesn't just want to get his people out of Egypt. He's going to confirm his identity as the Lord to the Israelites, to Pharaoh, to the Egyptians, and then to the entire world.

God says that he is going to stiffen the heart of Pharaoh, and there are a number of different words used in relationship to the heart of Pharaoh. At some points it talks about stiffening his heart. At other points it talks about the deadening, or making heavy of his heart, making it heavy and unresponsive.

And then at other points, his heart is strengthened. These things are not necessarily the same. It's also important to notice that sometimes Pharaoh does this to his own heart, and sometimes God does it to his heart.

There are a variety of different actions then, which aren't necessarily the same. And as we go through the narrative, it will become clear that these different actions serve different purposes.

[5 : 59] We should also recognise that on some level there is an openness to Pharaoh's future, some way in which things could go differently. If he did respond, the story of the Exodus might take a very different course.

And this is held out as a genuine possibility, I believe. Moses has previously performed a series of three signs before Israel to confirm his identity and his mission.

And now Aaron is called to perform a confirmatory sign before Pharaoh. Aaron squares off against the magicians of Egypt, while Moses squares off against Pharaoh himself.

And the fact that Aaron is as the prophet to Moses, and Moses is as God to Pharaoh, presents them as having different levels of opposition. While the magicians are around, Aaron's role is important.

He is the one who's particularly conflicting with them. There's as if it were the pawns on the board that need to be dealt with first, and then we'll get to the back row, the king, who's lying behind them.

[7 : 01] In the first three of the plagues, this conflict between Aaron and the magicians is prominent. And then later on, it's Pharaoh and Moses, and then Pharaoh and Yahweh himself.

The staff is cast to the ground, and it becomes a dragon or a sea monster. The word here is different from the word used earlier for the serpent. And when the staff of Moses is referred back to, it's spoken of as the one that turned into a serpent, not the dragon or the sea monster, as Aaron's staff turns into.

Aaron produces a dragon from his staff, but so do the Egyptian magicians. And the Egyptians seem to use spells or arts or trickery to achieve the same effect. That sort of effect can be achieved with a particular way of holding a snake, and so maybe they're doing that sort of thing.

However, Aaron's rod consumes theirs. And I think, among other things, this is a sign of the Red Sea, which swallowed the Egyptian dragon in its watery depth.

The same language is used for swallowing in chapter 15, verse 12, where the earth swallows the Egyptian men. We should also recognize that there is some connection between the Egyptians and the sea monster.

[8 : 15] In Psalm 74, verses 13 and 14, 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. So it's retelling the story of the Red Sea crossing and the destruction of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. And there they're described as sea monsters, as Leviathan, this great sea monster, the sea beast.

And it's destroyed in the waters. The heads are crushed. And in a similar way, the serpent of the Egyptians is crushed or defeated by the serpent of Israel, by the dragon that Aaron's rod turns into.

Again, that can relate to the imagery of the Red Sea, where you have this path through the sea, serpent-like path throughout the sea, and then the sea itself as some great sea monster swallowing up the Egyptians that enter into it.

Further reference to Egypt as a sea monster can be found in the book of Ezekiel, chapter 29, verses 3 to 5. Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, My Nile is my own.

[9 : 29] I made it for myself. I will put hooks in your jaws, and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales. And I will draw you up out of the midst of your streams, with all the fish of your streams that stick to your scales.

And I will cast you out into the wilderness, you and all the fish of your streams. You shall fall on the open field, and not be brought together or gathered. To the beasts of the earth and to the beasts of the heavens I give you as food.

Pharaoh the sea monster and the Egyptian sea monsters and fish are going to be defeated. And this is a prologue to the plagues. It's also an anticipation of the great climactic event of the Red Sea crossing.

It highlights the importance of the rod, and also the importance of the stubbornness of Pharaoh. Pharaoh responds with stubbornness when his magicians can replicate the sign.

It's also, ironically, in response to Pharaoh's own request for a wonder. The plagues are called signs and wonders in verse 3. They're meaningful portents of judgment.

[10 : 36] They're also a pattern of decreation. God is taking his creation and throwing it into a sort of tumult and chaos. He's breaking apart the order and making that order unravel and turn against man.

The plagues have some sort of pattern to them. There are three sets of three plagues, and then a climactic final plague. The first plague in each sequence of three, 1, 2, 3, and then 4, 5, 6, and then 7, 8, 9.

The first plague of each sequence, the first, the fourth, and the seventh, begins with Moses rising early in the morning and speaking to Pharaoh, generally as he comes out of the water.

The second plague, he comes to Pharaoh, presumably at the palace, to warn him, presumably during the day. And in the final plague, there is no warning. There's no opportunity to change course, maybe associated with the evening.

The plagues also seem to move upwards. They move from the very base of Egypt, the Nile, up throughout the whole building, from the waters beneath the earth to the heavens above the earth.

[11 : 46] Every single part of the creation is being touched by God's judgment and testifying to his authority. Another thing that's important to recognize is that this is drawing our attention back to the initial events of chapter one.

Moses threw the baby boys into the Nile. This is the covered up graveyard of Egypt. They've concealed the bodies in this place. And now the blood of those bodies is calling out from the water.

This is a nation that's built on covering up its crime. And now the creation itself is refusing to collaborate. There's a sign of Egypt's crime that's unmistakable and unavoidable.

It's also a sign of God's remembrance of Israel's suffering. They might have been wondering, has anyone seen this? The waters of the Nile continue to flow day by day as if there were no bodies in there at all, as if our children had not been killed within this river.

But now the creation itself testifies to the sin of the Egyptians. It's also an anticipation of the blood of the Egyptians themselves. In the book of Ezekiel chapter 32, there's a similar judgment made upon Pharaoh.

[13 : 00] You consider yourself a lion of the nations, but you are like a dragon in the seas. You burst forth in your rivers, trouble the waters with your feet and foul their rivers.

Thus says the Lord God, I will throw my net over you with a host of many peoples and they will haul you up in my dragnet. And I will cast you on the ground. On the open field, I will fling you and I will cause all the birds of the heavens to settle on you.

And I will gorge the beasts of the whole earth with you. I will strew your flesh upon the mountains and fill the valleys with your carcass. I will drench the land even to the mountains with your flowing blood and the ravines will be full of you.

It's the promise there that God will judge the people of Egypt and cause their blood to flow through the land. This anticipates the way that God will judge Egypt in the plagues and then in the final action at the Red Sea.

This is a warning. Now it's important to consider why God doesn't just whisk his people out of Egypt. He could do that. He could deliver them in one fell swoop without any need for all of these different plagues.

[14 : 10] The plagues seem to be serving a purpose beyond merely getting the Israelites out of the land. They seem to be serving a pedagogical purpose, a purpose of teaching the Egyptians and teaching others who God is and also teaching them about their sin so that they might repent.

This plague brings to light the crime of the Egyptians and it does so in a way that causes discomfort but not death. They could repent. If they really took the lesson of this plague to heart they could turn around and many within Egypt presumably do.

