

## Exodus 7:14-25

### Introduction

Last week we saw Moses and Aaron confronting Pharaoh, and giving him the “miracle” that he demanded. Only it wasn’t *just* a miracle, it was also a *sign*. Aaron’s staff turns into a “monstrous” serpent, and then “swallows up” the “monstrous” serpents of the Egyptian magicians. That was the “prologue” to the Ten Plagues.

Last week was the introductory act in the drama; and so this week we come to “main act I.” Now this first “main act” is divided into *nine* parts, equaling the first *nine* plagues – *not ten*, but *nine*. Moses clearly separates between the first nine plagues (which we’ll call Act I) and the tenth and final plague (which we’ll call Act II) And then the whole drama concludes with the grand finale of Act III when the Egyptians are drowned in the Sea after the Israelites have crossed safely over. So to sum up, we have the introductory act of the staff turned into a monstrous serpent, and then we have three “main acts,” with Act I being the first nine plagues, Act II being the tenth plague, and Act III being the crossing of the Sea and the joyful song of praise.

We know that the first nine plagues are separate from the last plague because of how they’ve been very carefully structured and put together. They’re divided into three cycles, or three sets of three. Plagues one, four, and seven all have Moses and Aaron going out to meet Pharaoh “in the morning” – with perhaps all three of these meetings being at the Nile River. (see chart on page 7) Plagues two, five, and eight all have Moses and Aaron going “in” to present themselves before Pharaoh probably at his palace or royal court. (see chart) And the last plagues of each cycle, plagues three, six, and nine, are not only very short, but they’re also the only plagues where there’s no mention of any confrontation with Pharaoh. (see chart) The tenth plague is set apart from the first nine by the fact that it doesn’t fit in any of these sets of three, and also because it’s only the tenth plague that’s connected with the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the consecration of the firstborn, and the actual exodus itself.

In our history books today, we don’t worry about “style” and “structure.” That’s because the point is *supposed* to be just the *objective reporting* of the *bare facts* of history. But here in Exodus, this stylistic patterning of the plagues helps us to remember that the point here is not just to tell us *what happened* (like today’s history books), but rather the true *meaning* of what happened. (cf. Enns) The point here is not *just* history (though it *is* history), but theology. We “study” God, and come to know who God is *through* God’s working and acting in history – on the earthly stage, or in the earthly theater, of His creation. So in the Bible, we cannot ever separate between history and theology. In the Bible, history is never just a bare reporting of the facts, but rather a communication of truth about our great Creator and Redeemer God. And this is never more the case than it is here in Moses’ historical/theological account of the ten plagues.

**I. Exodus 7:14** — Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.”

What the Lord says here is already painfully *obvious*. So then the question is, why does God say it? The Lord is simply driving home the point that none of this is a surprise to Him. To the

contrary, this is all according to plan. Pharaoh's heart is hardened, but that is *ultimately* because the Lord had already said that *He* would harden Pharaoh's heart *so that* he would refuse to let the people go. (4:21) Though Pharaoh is still fully *responsible* for his own refusal to let the people go, that does change the fact in the slightest that his hardness of heart is ultimately according to God's eternal purpose and His sovereign decree. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.'" This is just as I have *intended*.

But why would God decree, and even *intend*, the hardness of Pharaoh's heart? Why would God want to prolong the process and delay the ultimate outcome when if He wanted to He could accomplish Egypt's defeat and Israel's deliverance all in a single moment?

**II. Exodus 7:15** — "Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent."

Let's start out by setting the background. Egypt is a desert land without any significant rainfall. So listen to what Moses says to the Israelites in Deuteronomy chapter eleven:

- ✓ **Deuteronomy 11:10–11** — The land that you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and irrigated it, like a garden of vegetables. But the land that you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven.

While Canaan was watered by the rains, Egypt was a land that depended completely on irrigation. It was impossible in those days to dig wells deep enough to tap the supplies of water below the bedrock. So if it wasn't for the Nile river that flowed through Egypt and emptied into the Mediterranean Sea, there would have been no Egypt. No Nile River would have equaled no Egypt, because no Nile River would have meant no water. It's difficult to emphasize that point strongly enough in a country where we get plenty of rain and/or have wells that can be hundreds of feet deep. The Nile River was seen as the *source* of Egypt's very life and existence. In particular, the Nile would flood once a year, spreading river sediment and fertilizing the land so the crops would be healthy and abundant. The Nile was seen not only as the source of Egypt's existence, but as the source of Egypt's richness and fertility.

Now we can appreciate this even from a simply scientific and logical standpoint. But to top all of this off, the Egyptian religion was pantheistic. In other words, the Egyptians believed that there was divine life in nature itself. And if there was divine life in all of nature, then there must specifically be an especially strong and powerful divinity in the Nile! The Nile was not just a scientific source of life and abundance, it was a divine source of life and abundance. And so naturally the Nile was to be worshiped if it was to continue giving life to the people. The Egyptians represented the Nile god as a woman with a man's head, which symbolized and emphasized fertility – in this case the fertility that the Nile brought to the land. The name of this river god was Hapi. Here's a hymn that the Egyptians composed in praise of the god, Hapi:

"Hail to your [favor], Hapi, who goes up from the land, who comes to deliver Egypt, who brings food, who is abundant of provisions, who creates every sort of... good... who is enduring of customs, who returns at his due season, who fills Upper and Lower Egypt..."

everything that has come into being is [through] his power; there is no [place where men can live] without him.” (cf. Currid)

Now we can call this a hymn of praise, but I think we could also call this a hymn of flattery. The Egyptian gods were made in the image of men, and so they were fickle, and they could be manipulated, and ideally even controlled by the men who worshiped them. And so the Lord says in Ezekiel twenty-nine:

- ✓ Ezekiel 29:3 (cf. 29:9) — “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; I made it for myself.’”

If the Nile was Egypt’s god, then Egypt’s task, and especially the Pharaoh’s, was to bring that god to heel. Remember, too, that even the Pharaoh was considered to be divine.

Now just in case we think that all of this is old fashioned, and primitive, and pre-historic, we have to realize that this is one of the fastest growing, and most pervasive ideas of our own day – this idea that there is divine life in all of nature. The evolutionary theory, which says only that we’re all the products of a chance, naturalistic process has proven not to be *enough* to meet the spiritual needs of people. And so New Age mysticism has reintroduced mystery, and awe, and spirituality by simply *deifying* the evolutionary process, and the evolutionary results. If you remember the movie “Avatar,” that was a very blatant example of this sinful idolatry. Not only do people say that there is divine life in all of nature, but since we are part of nature, there is said to be divinity in all of us. I watched a youtube video recently of a pastor from a mainline denomination who was very subtly twisting the *Bible’s* teaching that we are all made in the image of God. Cloaked and hidden underneath his very Christian and biblical sounding words was the blasphemous idea that there is a spark of deity in all human beings. And so the ancient Egyptians were essentially no different from multitudes of “in vogue” people living today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – they made no *distinction* between the Creator and the creature. Instead, *just like* men and women today, they worshiped and served the creatures as their gods. *We* may not be guilty of totally collapsing the distinction between the Creator and the creature, but sometimes we can be guilty of beginning to blur the distinction – whether by thinking of God in human terms and categories, or even by an inappropriate awe at the magnitude and the mystery of creation. We need to watch out for this “blurring of the distinction” not only in our own lives, but also in the books, and the blogs of even some very sincere and well-meaning Christians.

The Egyptians worshiped the Nile as the divine source not only of Egypt’s very life and existence, but also of Egypt’s richness and abundance. And yet for all this, it was believed that the “river god” could still be manipulated, and ideally even controlled, by the divine/human Pharaoh. And so here in verse fifteen, what do we have? We have *Pharaoh* going out in the morning to the *Nile*. Apparently, this was his ritual. (cf. 8:20) It may be that he was going to bathe, like the princess in chapter two (2:5), but it could also be that even his bath was a ceremonial ritual in honor of Hapi, the river god. That seems most likely to me because Pharaoh could easily have had the water for his bath transported to the palace.

And so now with all this background in place, we read again God’s command to Moses in verse fifteen: “Go to *Pharaoh* in the morning, *as he is going out to the water*. Stand on the bank of the

*Nile* to meet him, **and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent.**” Did God really need to clarify *which staff*, so that Moses made sure to bring the right one? No. The point is not to identify which staff, but rather to emphasize what the staff *represents*. This is the staff that swallowed up the staffs of Pharaoh’s magicians. This is the staff that has already been called “the staff **of God**” in chapter four. (4:20) And so could it possibly be more obvious that what we’re being set up for is a **contest** — a contest *not* between Moses and Aaron, and Pharaoh, but a contest between Yahweh, the God of the slave-nation Israel, and all the many gods of the greatest superpower of that day. Can you see here that the stakes for all involved are massive?— For Pharaoh and the Egyptians and their gods, for the Israelite nation of slaves, for Moses and Aaron, for the course of the rest of history, and we can even say in some sense *for Yahweh Himself*.

And yet, of course, it is Yahweh Himself who has set this contest up. It’s God Himself who has choreographed every single detail to this point. It’s God Himself who foretold Israel’s slavery centuries earlier; it’s God Himself who *sent* Israel *into* Egypt in the first place; it’s God himself who turned the hearts of the Egyptians to hate His people (cf. Ps. 105:25); and it’s God Himself who now hardens Pharaoh’s heart. God not only sets up the contest, but He also determines how long the contest will last. And, of course, now it’s God Himself who strategically chooses the exact timing and the exact location of this moment. **This** is the context in which we have to read Yahweh’s command to Moses: “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 to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent.’”

**III. Exodus 7:16–18** — “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. The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.’””

In verse fifteen, the Lord said to Moses, “Take *in your hand* the staff that turned into a serpent.” But did you notice verse seventeen? Moses is to say to Pharaoh, “**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.”” The staff that is in *whose* hand? *Who* is it that will strike the Nile? It would seem that it is Yahweh Himself who will *strike* the Nile with Yahweh’s own staff. Moses and Aaron are just the messengers, or the means’, that Yahweh has chosen to use. Verse twenty will say that “Moses and Aaron *did* as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants *he* [Aaron] lifted up the staff and [*he* (Aaron)] struck the water in the Nile.” And yet, then again, in verse twenty-five Moses will summarize this entire account with these simple words: “Seven full days passed after **Yahweh** had *struck* the Nile.” (7:25)

So what will happen when Yahweh, the God of Israel, *strikes* Hapi, the river god of Egypt? The life-giving water in the Nile will turn to blood, killing the fish, and causing the Nile to reek of death. Yahweh will demonstrate His sovereign power over the Nile—and therefore over Pharaoh—by striking the Nile and rendering it powerless to deliver any life or sustenance to the people of Egypt. Instead, the Nile will be a stinking, rotting picture and source of death itself.

Well, now that we've had the announcement *to Pharaoh*, we have the same message repeated a second time as God tells Moses exactly what to say *to Aaron*.

**IV. Exodus 7:19** — And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their 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.’”

This is the same basic information, but now with some added detail about the *full* and *unlimited extent* of the plague. The “rivers” (or streams) are probably the different branches of the Nile as it empties into the Mediterranean Sea to the north of Egypt. The “canals” are the irrigation ditches that were connected with the Nile to fertilize and water the fields. The “ponds” were probably the small bodies of water that were left after the overflowing of the Nile. And the “pools” were the artificial cisterns made to store the waters of the Nile for later use. (cf. Kaiser) Not only would the rivers, and canals, and ponds, and pools be turned to blood, but even the water from the Nile that had already been collected and stored in the Egyptian’s houses in vessels of wood and vessels of stone—even this water, too, would be turned to blood, so that as the Lord says, there would be blood “throughout all the land of Egypt.”

Yahweh’s point here is not just how bad things will be for the Egyptians, but rather the full extent of His victory, and the unlimited reach of His sovereignty. Hapi, the Egyptian river god, is to be rendered *totally* and *completely* powerless by the sovereign power and authority of Yahweh. When Yahweh strikes the Nile with His rod, what *was* a symbol and a source of life will now become a symbol and a source of death.

Well, after the initial announcement to Pharaoh, and then the instructions for Aaron, we now have the same message repeated a *third* time as Moses describes how everything actually happened precisely as the Lord had said it would.

**V. Exodus 7:20-21**— 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.

This threefold repetition is meant to burn into our minds the victory that Yahweh wins. And once again, all we have is simple obedience. Moses and Aaron only do as the Lord commands, while it’s Yahweh who displays *His* power and triumphs over the gods of Egypt.

Notice how Moses describes very dramatically the actual moment of the confrontation: “*In the sight* of Pharaoh *and in the sight* of his servants [Aaron] *lifted up* the staff and struck the water in the Nile.” And so we are also invited to witness this victory that Yahweh wins, as it were with our very own eyes. Moses describes it very simply: “And all the water in the Nile turned into blood.” Just as the Lord had said, so it happened: “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.”

And so it is that “round one” goes to Yahweh the God of Israel – who is also God in Egypt, the *only true God* over all creation. In fact, the first victory is so decisive that we wonder how there could even be a “round two.” But there *will be* a round two because this is what the Lord Himself has purposed and planned. So we read in verses 22-25:

**VI. Exodus 7:22-25** — 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 take even 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.

### **Conclusion**

Here in this plague—and, as we’ll see, throughout *all* the plagues—the Lord drives home the absolute *distinction* and *separation* between the Creator and the creature; between the Creator and His creation. When God strikes the Nile, He strikes a death blow to the spiritual, mystical environmentalism of today – the environmentalism that means what it says when it calls this planet “mother earth.” No matter how beyond us the creation may be, *only the Creator* is worthy of our reverent awe, and adoration, and worship. (cf. Exod. 20:2-5)

And so it’s by means of this contest in Exodus that the Lord would show that He alone is the *source* not only of Egypt’s life and existence, but also of the land’s fertility and abundance. If the Nile flows with blood and death because Yahweh has commanded it, then when the Nile flows with life-giving water, it must also be because Yahweh has commanded it. Sometimes we are tempted to see the hand of God only in the miraculous, or at the very least, only in those things that are most unlikely or unusual. But when it comes to what we call the “natural laws of nature,” then we tend to think of God as more distant or not as directly involved. But the Bible knows of no such distinction. The Lord says in Job that when the waves stop on the beach, it is only because He commands them. (Job 38:8-11) When the morning comes after the night, it is always because He has commanded it. (Job 38:12) When the constellations appear in the night sky, it is only because He has led them forth. (Job 38:31-33) When the clouds unleash their water, and the lightning strikes, this is only because He has given the order. (Job 38:34-35) And so also when the Nile flows with water that brings life and sustenance to the land and the people of Egypt, this is only because Yahweh Himself daily gives the command.

Egypt’s “god” is nothing more than the creation of Yahweh, which the one true God is able to vanquish whenever He chooses just by striking it with His staff. This is the God in whom we *trust*, in all the different circumstances of this life. This is the God to whom we *pray*. This is the God who calls us to wholehearted *obey* Him and *serve* Him every single day that we live. This is the God who is able to *keep*, and *protect*, and *look after* each one of us according to His perfect wisdom and His perfect plan. As the Psalmist says in Psalm forty-eight:

✓ Psalm 48:14 [NIV] — *This God is our God* for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.

**1<sup>st</sup>** Sign/Plague: Water turned to blood

Exodus 7:14–15 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “...Go to Pharaoh *in the morning, as he is going out to the water*. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him...”

**2<sup>nd</sup>** Sign/Plague: Frogs

Exodus 8:1 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “**Go in** to Pharaoh and say to him...”

**3<sup>rd</sup>** Sign/Plague: Gnats

Exodus 8:16–19 — [No warning or dialogue with Pharaoh / short]

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**4<sup>th</sup>** Sign/Plague: Flies

Exodus 8:20 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “**Rise up early in the morning** and **present yourself to Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water...**”

**5<sup>th</sup>** Sign/Plague: Death of livestock

Exodus 9:1 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “**Go in** to Pharaoh and say to him...”

**6<sup>th</sup>** Sign/Plague: Boils

Exodus 9:8–12 — [No warning or dialogue with Pharaoh / short]

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**7<sup>th</sup>** Sign/Plague: Hail

Exodus 9:13 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “**Rise up early in the morning** and **present yourself before Pharaoh...**”

**8<sup>th</sup>** Sign/Plague: Locusts

Exodus 10:1 — Then the LORD said to Moses, “**Go in** to Pharaoh...”

**9<sup>th</sup>** Sign/Plague: Darkness

Exodus 10:21–23 — [No warning or dialogue with Pharaoh / short]