

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 7:8-13

To understand more about the pre-plague miracle of the serpents.

Read the Text:

“Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 9 “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.’” 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. 11 Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. 12 For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs. 13 Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.” (Exodus 7:1-7, ESV)

Study the Text:

A Showdown with Snakes

Verse 8 begins by God telling Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh and perform a miracle. The miracle will consist of casting a staff onto the ground in front of Pharaoh, and seeing the staff become a serpent. There are several nuances to this story, however, that are important to understand in order to connect with what is actually transpiring. Below are some important details.

SERPENTS, SEA MONSTERS, DRAGONS, OH MY!

This is at first glance, similar to the power endowed to Moses in Exodus 4:1-5 wherein Moses was told to throw down his staff and it miraculously turned into a serpent. However, the Hebrew words are different and thus what unfolds in chapter 7 is evidently quite different. In chapter 4, Moses’ staff turns into a נָחָשׁ (*nachash*), a word that denotes a venomous snake. If you recall, Moses recoiled in fear of being bitten (Ex. 4:3). However, in chapter 7, Aaron’s staff turns into a תַּנִּינִיּוֹן (*tanniyn*), a word that is often translated often as “sea monster.” In the Genesis creation account, God creates the “sea creatures” (*tanniyn*) that populate the oceans (Gen. 1:20-21). Psalm 74:13 says, “You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.” Job asks in Job 7:12: “Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that you set a guard over me?” Interestingly, later in biblical history God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel to a different pharaoh: “Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon (*tanniyn*) that lies in the midst of his streams” (Ez. 29:3).

In fact, the Greek translation of the Old Testament renders the Hebrew word *tanniyn* as δράκων, the word from which we get our English word “dragon” (a different Greek word, ὄφις is used in Ex. 4:3 to describe the serpent transformed from Moses’ staff). This imagery of a dragon is also consistent with *Rahab the dragon*, described in part in Isaiah 51:9, ancient Jewish extra-biblical literature, and in ancient Near Eastern mythologies as well. In ancient Near Eastern mythology, *Rahab* was a great sea monster that symbolized pre-creation chaos. Moreover, *Rahab* was used as an alternative name for Egypt in Old Testament literature (Is.

30:7; Ps. 87:4). While powerful and scary, *Rahab* (or Egypt) will prove to be no match for Yahweh. The LORD will crush the monster (Ps. 89:10) and dismember it (Job 26:12).

All of these details concerning the term *tanniyn* points to a much different event than what is often depicted. It is likely that Aaron's staff did not simply turn into a venomous serpent, but a large reptilian monster or perhaps even a dragon. The size of the creature would have elicited a palpably different kind of horrific reaction than a mere snake would. This, coupled with the fact that serpents were a signet for Egyptian kings indicates the personal nature of this miracle towards the Egyptians. It is as if Moses and Aaron were saying, "You worship a king who thinks he is a serpent; this is what a true serpent looks like!"

ANCIENT ARTS

Given the scope and size of such a creature as the one Aaron conjured, this also changes the way we understand court magicians of Pharaoh. In *Prince of Egypt*, this scene is depicted as an of "smoke and mirrors," wherein the court magicians fool people into thinking they have matched wits with Moses and Aaron. But how could they have faked summoning a creature such as *tanniyn*? The answer, likely, is that they really conjured one as well. Modern readers need not try and explain away how mere men could have accomplished this. Exodus is full of supernatural events that modernity will have a hard time comprehending, including arcane sorcery.

There is a reason that Scripture strictly prohibits magic or sorcery (Ex. 22:18; Deut. 18:10-11; Lev. 19:31; Is. 8:19; Acts 19:19; Gal. 5:19-21; Rev. 21:8). These prohibitions would not have been necessary if sorcery were not actually a real threat. King Saul is seen consulting with a medium to bring Samuel back from the dead, an act that is portrayed as overtly negative and dark (1 Sam. 28:1-25). Likewise, the account of King Manasseh in 2 Kings 21 gives special attention to the fact that he "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (2 Kg. 21:2) which included burning his son as an offering to Moloch and practicing witchcraft (2 Kg. 21:6). There are numerous examples that illustrate the reality of witchcraft. With that in mind, who is to say that the court magicians of Pharaoh could not have conjured something unnatural as well? These "wise men," "sorcerers" and "magicians" practiced their "secret arts" which no doubt fell into the blasphemous categories that are condemned in the above passages. They are condemned, in part, because they are real.

SWALLOWED

Though the magicians were able to conjure the same kind of *tanniyn* creatures as Aaron by throwing down their own staffs (Ex. 7:12), Aaron still enjoyed the last laugh - his creature devoured all of theirs: "But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs" (Ex. 7:12). While the court magicians were able to match wits with Aaron by seemingly performing the same kind of miracle, Aaron still "won" in the end. Curiously, the text doesn't say "But Aaron's serpent swallowed up their serpents," but it only refers to the *tanniyn* creatures as staffs, for that is all they actually were. The miracle of transformation didn't actually change the staffs permanently.

UNIMPRESSED

Though Aaron's staff proved victorious over the staffs of the magicians, it did not sway Pharaoh at all: "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said." This final pre-plague miracle was the last effort of Moses and Aaron before the first plague would begin, and even that would not make a difference immediately. Remember, Pharaoh's heart was "hardened" (*hāzaq*) which simply means that God "strengthened" Pharaoh's heart and resolve to continue doing what he already desired to do.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the fact that even miracles are not convincing to someone who isn't submitted to God. In Luke chapter 16, a similar example of this is found. Lazarus and the rich man both die, and the rich man ends up on the wrong side of the abode of the dead because of his lack of belief. In shock, he pleads with Abraham to let him go and warn his family that is still alive lest they end up suffering the same fate as him: "And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent'" (Lk. 16:30). However, Abraham responded back: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Lk. 16:31). Jesus was, of course, foreshadowing His own death, but the point is the same; no amount of supernatural evidence will convince someone to believe who has already decided not to believe. Pharaoh was unshaken by this incredible feat that Aaron performed, no doubt in part because of his own court magicians' ability to do the same as well. Another takeaway is the reality of magic. It is not prohibited because it's make-believe, but because it is actually real and capable of horrible things. One final takeaway is just how strange the world of the Old Testament really was. Staffs turn into sea monsters or dragons, these creatures devour other like-creatures... it all sounds too strange to be real, but it is real. Modernity has a difficult time accepting that, but we would be wise to conform to Scripture rather than attempting to conform Scripture to our context.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 7:8-9. What would Pharaoh eventually ask of Moses and Aaron according to God? What were they to do in response? Is this a miracle that God has already shown them how to perform?

2. Read Exodus 7:10. What did Aaron do before Pharaoh? How was this miracle similar to the one that God showed Moses in Exodus 4:3? According to the note, how was this miracle different?

Day Two

1. Read Psalm 74:13 and Job 7:12. How is the "sea monster" described in these passages? Knowing that this is the same word (*tanniyn*) as what describes the serpent in Exodus 7:10, what kind of image does this paint of the events in Exodus?

2. Read Ezekiel 29:3, Ps. 89:10, and Isaiah 51:9. Who does Rahab sometimes symbolize? What will the LORD do to Rahab?

Day Three

3. Read Exodus 7:11. What were the court magicians able to do in response to Aaron's miracle?

4. Read Galatians 5:19-21 and Rev. 21:8. What kind of lists are these? What is included in this list that is connected to this story in Exodus?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 7:12. What did Aaron's staff do to the magicians' staffs?

2. Read Exodus 7:13. How was Pharaoh affected by the miracle that Aaron performed?

Discuss the Text!

Week 14 Discussion: Lack of Belief

One of the big takeaways of this passage is that even miracles cannot make someone believe in God or submit to Him. Aaron conjures either a serpent, sea monster, or dragon, and yet it is unimpressive to Pharaoh. Talk as a group about people in your life who desire to believe, and the right (and sometimes wrong) ways you go about trying to convince them to believe.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever seen a miracle? If so, share with the group.
2. Do miracles have the potential to make someone believe in Jesus Christ? Why or why not?
3. What is the only thing that can bring someone to faith in Jesus Christ?
4. Read Romans 10:14-15. What are the implications from this?
5. Does the Bible say anything you struggle to believe? Talk about it.
6. Write down the names of people you desire to see come to faith, and spend some time as a group praying for those people by name.

Takeaways:

1. Aaron throws down his staff and it turns into a *tanniyn* creature.
2. The court magicians of Pharaoh are able to match Aaron, but their staffs are consumed by Aaron's staff.
3. Pharaoh still is uninterested in listening to the LORD.