

Studies in Exodus No. 10

Exodus 7:8-13

May 8, 2005

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Now begins the new contest between Moses and Aaron, speaking on God's behalf, on the one hand, and Pharaoh on the other. Moses approached this conference, as we learned in 6:30, with trepidation. But the Lord had told him what would transpire. The Lord would make Pharaoh's heart hard and that would give the Lord the opportunity to multiply his miraculous signs and wonders performed against Egypt. At the last, Pharaoh will have no choice but to relent and let Israel go. Indeed, from this point on, Moses seems to be confident that everything will fall out just as the Lord has said and he does not hesitate to carry out the Lord's instructions without hesitation or complaint.

- v.9 What we have in this section is something like what diplomats do when they first arrive in a country. They "present their credentials." They show that they are empowered to speak on behalf of some government or another. Well so with Moses and Aaron who are to speak on Yahweh's behalf. Pharaoh would have expected the prophets of his own Egyptian deities to perform some act beyond the power of mere human beings. Egyptian magicians or priest were adept at doing this, the kind of thing we would call "magic" today, parlor tricks if you will. If Pharaoh were to pay any attention to these Hebrews, they would have to prove that they had some authority to speak for a god.
- v.11 Later Hebrew tradition tells us that the names of these magicians were Jannes and Jambres, mentioned, as you may remember, in 2 Tim. 3:8.

Magic or sorcery played an important role in the life of the ancient Near East. Magic was regarded as the power to achieve some result beyond the laws of natural causation, something that would otherwise be impossible. The magician was supposed to have the power to compel the forces of nature to bend to his will, which meant that he was actually able even to force the gods to do his will. There was no room for this in Israel's religion. God was the creator, the Almighty who ruled over everyone and everything, and could not be forced against his will to do anything by anyone. As a result all forms of magic, sorcery, divination and the like are strictly forbidden in the law of God. However it is also true that the Bible characteristically pours scorn and makes mockery of the supposed magical powers of ancient priests and magicians. It was, of course, all of a piece with ANE idolatry, it was part of that belief there were many gods whose powers could be manipulated by man and the Bible regularly mocks all of this as silly superstition. Magic is no more real than the idols or the petty gods the idols are supposed to represent.

But in this case the Egyptian sorcerers did the same thing – created snakes out of staffs – and did so by their spells and charms. Moses and Aaron simply obeyed God's order, they did what they were told. There were no incantations; there was no spell; there was no charm; they simply threw down the staff and it became a serpent as God said it would. This is a miracle in the ordinary biblical sense of the term: a supernatural event obviously, publicly, and demonstrably beyond the power of human beings.

In the first few plagues that follow the paragraph that we are reading this evening the Egyptian magicians again match the results achieved by Moses and Aaron (7:22 “blood”; 8:7 “frogs”), but soon they were unable to reproduce the same effects (8:14) and, after that, they are heard of no more.

- v.12 But, lest there be any mistake, the Lord demonstrates his authority and his supreme power when the snake he has created from Aaron’s staff swallows up the snakes created by the Egyptian sorcerers. All of this sounds very, very strange to modern ears. Surely it does. I am absolutely certain there some people sitting here listening to me thinking to themselves, “Did this really happen?”
- v.13 There was evidence enough in this first encounter between Moses and Aaron and the Egyptian court to persuade Pharaoh that this was not a battle he could win, but his heart became hard – as the Lord had said he would make it – and he refuses to listen to Moses and Aaron and so refuses to listen to Yahweh. The stage is now set for the beginning of these ten hammer blows that God is going to deliver against the body of the Egyptian nation.

Now there is an obvious question raised by this narrative for believing readers of the Bible. Did the Egyptian sorcerers really have this miraculous power? We are not surprised that Yahweh could perform such a wonder – turning a staff into a live snake. The creator of heaven and earth, the creator of staffs and snakes, can do whatever he likes and nothing is beyond his power to perform. And the *only* reason modern human beings stumble at this is because they have somehow or another been convinced that this world took shape and came to have the form that it did and does by accident. Take away evolution, believe it no more, and be left with a creation that requires a Creator, believe in a God who actually made the world and made us as his supreme creatures, and all of this immediately becomes not only plausible, but I think we would say likely; inevitable that God would show his hand, the Creator of heaven and earth would at some point show his hand in this world and reveal himself in unmistakable ways to his creatures. But should we think that the sorcerers had power to perform such a wonder themselves? Are we to think that they had done this before?

Different opinions have been expressed on this point in the history of the interpretation of this passage. Some have argued that both sides in fact performed nothing but a conjurer’s trick – some suggesting that you can make a snake go rigid by pressing on the nerve at the back of its neck. I’ve never actually tried that so I am not sure whether that is true or not, but it would not account for the devouring of the other snakes, and it would certainly not make out of it a staff with which you could walk into a courtroom. Many have thought that while Aaron’s rod actually turned into a snake – it was an act of divine creative power – the sorcerers could imitate Aaron’s accomplishment only by trickery and the appearance of a change from wood to flesh. They were magicians only in the modern sense. They made the audience gasp but only by sleight of hand. I have seen magician shows, perhaps you have too. Phil Foxwell, who was for many years a Bible Presbyterian, Reformed Presbyterian, and then Presbyterian Church of America missionary in Japan, was a very accomplished magician. When he put on a show, he did the whole thing. He sawed his wife in half and sent her two parts to the various sides of the stage

and then put her back together again. He levitated his daughter and ran the hula hoop over her body. He did one thing after another and made you scratch your head. You knew it wasn't possible, but you couldn't see how he was doing it, he was a professional magician. There are people who think this is what was done by these Egyptian sorcerers. Others have thought that the sorcerers really did have this power, perhaps a power that evil spirits gave to them, and that in the pre-modern world there was much more of this taking place because the Devil wanted to keep human beings under his thumb by making them frightened of the supernatural power that his servants could wield. This would not have been the first time they did such a thing by their magic arts.

In my view, there are several reasons to believe both that the sorcerers really did change real wooden staffs into real snakes and that this was the first and only time that they had ever been able to wield such supernatural power.

1. The text clearly says that the staffs became snakes. It is obvious that the narrator is telling us that is what happened. What is more the public triumph of God's power over that of the Egyptian priests is demonstrated not by proving that the Egyptian snakes were not real snakes, but by having his snake devour their snakes.
2. But there are reasons; it seems to me, not to think that this was a power that the Egyptian sorcerers had in the nature of the case. Indeed, personally, I imagine no one was as surprised as they were when their staffs actually turned into snakes.
 - a. First, the Bible, as I said, typically does not credit the supernaturalism of ancient Near Eastern religion. By and large it mocks it as imaginary. The Bible taught people in the ancient world to be as skeptical of supernatural claims as we are skeptical of such claims in our day. We don't really believe that if you pay \$2.99 per minute to call the psychic hotline you are going to get some genuine information about your future. Idols are nothing and the Bible often pokes fun at the stupidity of carving a piece of wood, using the remainder in your fireplace and bowing down to the rest. The fortune tellers of Egypt in Genesis and Babylon in Daniel, remember, are depicted as hopelessly incompetent to predict the future. And God makes a point of saying that he alone knows what is to come to pass. In fact, this would be the only place in the Old Testament where sorcerers were described as actually wielding supernatural power, if, in fact, we are to take from this incident the teaching that they had such power and often wielded it. Remember the futility of the prophets of Baal as they sought to get their god to send fire from heaven in answer to Elijah's challenge? That futility is utterly characteristic. The Bible does not take this seriously and does not teach us to take it seriously.
 - b. On the other hand, there is one other occasion in which evil supernatural power surfaced to public view in this world. I'm thinking of the outbreak of demonic power that occurred when Christ's public ministry began. We have no record of any incidence of demon possession anywhere throughout the entire corpus of the Old Testament, but when Jesus appeared on the scene as the incarnate savior and so far as we know only at the beginning of his public ministry, demon possession was found everywhere and supernatural power was wielded in many ways by demons who had taken over the lives of human beings. At the point of crisis when the battle was joined in its most climatic moment in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ evil power surfaces to public view in the world in part, I think, so that it may be plainly demonstrated to everyone that Christ's

power is far greater than that power. Here in the narrative of the exodus we have the great Old Testament counterpart of the public ministry of Jesus. This is the great redemptive event of Old Testament history. This is the great anticipation of the redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ and his deliverance of his people from bondage to sin and death and so perhaps it is not surprising that, here, of all places, only here, do we find supernatural power being wielded publicly on the side on the side of the enemy. There are such patterns to be found in Holy Scripture. So we have demonic power on public display but only here and only to make possible the more complete and public demonstration of the Lord's far greater power.

- c. Third, while we have the Egyptian priests able to duplicate what Moses and Aaron do in acts of miraculous power and then again in the case of the first two plagues also do the same, by the third they are helpless and, subsequently they are brushed aside and are mentioned no more. All of that seems to suggest that, like Pharaoh himself, these sorcerers are a foil against which the power and might of the living God is to be revealed and displayed. He hardens Pharaoh's heart in order to multiply his miraculous deeds. He allows the Egyptian magicians a bit of early success so as to make his triumph the more complete, maybe also to make Pharaoh more confident that he can resist the Lord and refuse to let Israel go. In the same way, demon possession, whatever the Devil meant to accomplish by it, in God's providence provided a perfect foil for the Lord to demonstrate his power over the unseen forces of evil.
- d. I think, therefore, that the magicians threw down their staffs and were terrified to find them turning into snakes. But when they did, and when Aaron's snake devoured their snakes, they saw something that no one could deny. There was a spiritual power loose in the world. There was a battle underway between good and evil between God and the false gods of the world. These men had a power that they themselves had heretofore only dreamed of. And whatever they thought their gods or their magic could do, it obviously couldn't do what Yahweh could do. God accommodated himself to the pagan mind, as he often did; and demonstrated the futility of pagan hopes. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to bring fire down from heaven because lightning was supposed to be Baal's specialty. The Lord was challenging him at his own game, so to speak; at least that is how it would have seemed to those who believed in such a god as Baal. Here the same happens. Yahweh bests the sorcerers and proves them powerless before him and does so in the manner that would have been most convincing, most startling, and most memorable to those who were witnesses of these things. Let them get a taste of power; let them see Yahweh dispatch it; and then let them see the Lord brush it aside and pay no more attention to it at all as he marches through proud Egypt scattering its peoples left and right.

But now, there is surely an important lesson here. By whatever means, there is this moment when it appears that the enemies of God actually have some power to wield against him. It is only for a few moments, but imagine Aaron and Moses' instantaneous reaction when the other snakes appeared, before their snake devoured them.

The fact is, as in so many other ways in this paradigmatic history, we have here a window on reality here; a picture of how the contest between truth and error is waged in this world. And we are being reminded, as often in the Bible and very often in the observation of life that the

position of unbelief, even of rebellion against God, is often made to seem plausible, even convincing if only for a short while.

Over and over again, as it were, the Egyptian sorcerers seem to do as well as Aaron and Moses, or even better.

Think, for example, of *scholarship*. It is one thing to have a dumb, unlearned, uneducated person attack the Christian faith. It is another thing entirely to have it attacked by some of the most formidable and creative minds in the world. One of the great scientists of the 20th century, J.B.S. Haldane, the English geneticist and the popularizer of evolution in the 1920's and 30's, did not hesitate to say in public that "organized religion [he was really meaning Christianity] made its appeal only through fear and shame and was only necessary for emotional and defective people." How does that make you feel? In his view "only the dregs of the universities" went into the Christian ministry. I never have liked J.B.S. Haldane! [Dudley-Smith, *John Stott*, i, 195] Many great minds joined the choir that sang that chorus in the 20th century. It is not an easy thing, for a university student, to believe that such powerful minds, minds that have discovered some of the most remarkable secrets of the universe, could be utterly mistaken and, when it comes to the truth about the world and about reality, could be hopelessly outmatched by some uneducated Christian who believes in God. But it is so. And time after time, the overweening pride and confidence of unbelieving scholarship has in due time, usually in a relatively short time as things are measured in the history of this world, been brought low. The great sorcerers of the modern world were Darwin, Marx, and Freud. Marx, whose serpents seemed so threatening just a few years ago, has now been devoured by the march of time. Freud's snake is only half eaten, but the head has already disappeared. And now, we are seeing Darwin and his theory of the origins of life beginning to topple before our very eyes. One has only to wait to see God's snake devouring the sorcerers' snakes. And eventually the world will laugh at the silly errors that once were taken so seriously and had all the weight of impressive scholarship behind them as did magic and sorcery in the very sophisticated world of the Ancient Near East. We laugh at those people but they have accomplished things we have not come close to imitating in our own so sophisticated day.

Or, think of good works. It would, of course, be so much simpler if all the unbelievers were hateful, cruel, selfish, and boorish. If everyone who wasn't a Christian kicked dogs, refused to help little old ladies across streets, loved to foreclose on the mortgages of poor and needy people, beat their wives and children, and were drunks to boot; it would be easy to see in a moment that the Lord's way was the way of truth. But it is not so. There are unbelievers who are kindly people, generous people, people who are faithful to their obligations, loved of their family, admirable in their public conduct. The way of faith in Christ *is* the only true way to live an authentic human life, but it can look, at least for a time, as if other ways work as well. The sorcerers can also create their serpents. Augustine reflected on the unmistakable fact that unbelievers do good things, worthy things, kind things that help people. He called such good works done by unbeliever's *peccata splendida*, splendid sins. They are like those impressive snakes the Egyptian priests created from their staffs, at least until they were devoured.

And so it is if we are thinking not about scholarship that discovers truth but despises *the truth* or good works done by those who are rebels against God and Christ, but are thinking instead about

beauty. Some of the most beautiful things in this world, some of the most exquisite creations of the human spirit and of human genius, are the work of those who deny that beauty comes from God, that the capacity to create and to discern beauty and enjoy it comes from God, and that the foundation of all beauty in creation is that beauty that exists in God himself. Whether we are speaking of painting or sculptor, architecture or music, prose or poetry, much or most of what stirs us as supremely beautiful, most of what has been preserved from the past because of its superior worth was created by men who had no love for Christ and no commitment to the truth of his Word. What is this but the sorcerers creating their own snakes and seeming to have power apart from God? But, again, it doesn't last. Leave these creative geniuses to themselves long enough and they will spoil, they always spoil, what first they created to be so beautiful. The Venus de Milo becomes the *Playboy* centerfold. It happens *every* time.

Or think of the influences of *religion* in the world. Religions, even the worst of them, often have some good effect; wield some wholesome influence, or, at least, what seems for a time to be wholesome. They give people a purpose in life, they teach moral standards and self-denial, and they elevate the concerns and interests of human beings. Islam has not been by any means an unqualified evil in the world. It has had many benign and some very positive effects upon the societies that have embraced it as their religion. But, like the Egyptian sorcerers, sooner or later, and often sooner, the seemingly good things are swallowed up and are no more. Think of the Egyptian religions, the Egyptian gods, for example. For them, phantoms that they were, were built the magnificent temples at Karnak on the Nile. The temple to Aton is one of the most impressive human creations in the world. It is so immense that you can put all the great cathedrals of Europe in a corner of it. Its pillars are so huge that it takes eleven adult men holding hands to get around one of them. But no one worships Aton any more. No one in Egypt worships Aton any more. No one has for centuries. And no one worships Baal or Marduk either. They are nothing but historical curiosities, the sort of thing people look back on nowadays with only thinly disguised amusement. And so it will be for every other man-made faith, every other superstition that men have embraced so that they wouldn't have to embrace the truth and submit themselves to the living God. They once were serpents on the floor of an Egyptian palace, but they have long since been devoured by the truth of God.

In other words, time and time again it has seemed that the unbelieving world has just as much credibility as God's people do and unbelief has as much credibility as faith in Christ. But it does not last and the world's serpents are *always* soon enough devoured by the Lord's. And, as we continue the narrative of the plagues it will become clear beyond any shadow of doubt that the Lord is not only going to defeat his enemies, but is going to dust off the place where once they stood!

Remember, we said at the outset of our study of the exodus and the history leading up to it, that this history is paradigmatic. We are being told not simply the history of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. We are, in that history, being taught how to view the world and God's salvation. And here is an important piece of that worldview. There will always be some appearance of power, effect, and reality in the unbelieving world. It is appearance only but at the time and for a time it can seem like the real thing. God wants his people to live by faith and so he tests our faith, but only for a time. The truth of God's power and will always wins out in the end. That is the story of human history from its beginning to the present day. Reality always soon or later

trumps appearance. And Christians can have this confidence even as the sorcerers' snakes are swarming over the palace floor. "The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever."

Speaking of the truth of God, such truth as God had told Moses before he entered the palace that day, and every other piece of truth that God has revealed to his people in his word, the great 17th century English Puritan William Gurnall wrote,

"News may come that truth is sick, but never that it is dead. No, it is error that is short-lived. 'A lying tongue is but for a moment,' but truth's age runs parallel with God's eternity. Wouldest thou but in thy thought wipe away tears and blood, which now cover the face of suffering truth, and present it to thy eye as it shall look in glory, thou couldest not but cleave to it with a love stronger than death." [*A Christian in Complete Armor*, 2:60]

Or, in William Blake's lovely verses:

Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau;
Mock on, mock on; 'tis all in vain!
You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again.

And every sand becomes a gem
Reflected in the beams divine;
Blown back they blind the mocking eye,
But still in Israel's paths they shine.

The atoms of Democritus
And Newton's particles of light
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.

Or, back to J.B.S. Haldane, the great scholar of modern genetics who so despised the Bible and the Christian faith, but who nevertheless discovered wonderful things about the nature of creation. It is genetics, the science of information stored and used in the cell, this extraordinarily almost impossibly complex world of information inside the cell. It is the science of genetics to which Haldane made such epoch making contributions, that appears now likely to be the final nail in Darwin's coffin. One more sorcerer's serpent eaten up; once again the palace floor clean as a whistle! Haldane didn't intend to give glory to God with his discoveries, but that is in fact what he did!

So we conclude where we began. Did the sorcerers have that power as a rule? No. God gave it to them for this very purpose, to reveal his own power as supremely superior to every other power in the world. Finally, after giving the sorcerers a few days of real power, to tempt them into thinking that maybe they could stand up to Yahweh, power they had never exercised, never

even witnessed before, the Lord said, “Enough!” And he took the power away. Jesus said something about that.

“Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”