

March 5th, 2023

The Staff That Became a Serpent That Swallowed the Curse

Exodus 7:1-13

The Story behind the story

The Exodus account is the most significant redemptive act of God in the entire ancient world. It is referenced hundreds of times throughout the rest of Scripture.¹ It shapes everything. In fact, one author put it like this:

“Who are you, Israel?”

“Oh, we are the people who got redeemed from Egypt.”

“Who is God?”

“He is the God who brought us out of Egypt.”²

And yet, when we get to the NT, Jesus interprets the entire Exodus account as playing a subordinate role to the real story. He said in **John 5:46** “...if you believed Moses, you would believe me; *for he wrote of me.*” The Exodus, written by Moses, was *ultimately* about the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is crystal clear in this morning’s passage.

Moses’ Recommissioning

So let’s set the stage. Chapter 6 ends with Moses confessing his sin, **v.30** “But Moses said to the LORD, ‘Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips. How will Pharaoh listen to me?’” God answers in **7:1** “**See**, I have made you like God (אֱלֹהִים *‘elōhîm*) to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.” Civil magistrates are called ‘gods’ elsewhere in Scripture³ because they carry

¹ cf. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pg. 683ff

² Andrew Wilson @ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/how-the-exodus-shapes-the-whole-bible/>

³ cf. Psalm 58:1; Psalm 82:1

God's authority over nations. Yahweh is telling Moses that he has nothing to worry about because he is now god (lower case 'g') over Pharaoh. Moses will punish Pharaoh for his disobedience, and Pharaoh will have to plead with Moses to remove every plague. Furthermore Aaron will be Moses' prophet, his mouthpiece, the mediator between he and Pharaoh.

v.2 "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." Moses's responsibility was *simply* to speak the words of Yahweh Himself.

v.3-4 "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart,⁴ 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." God ordained that Pharaoh would not listen—a judicial hardening upon this serpent king—so that His deliverance would be all the more conspicuous.⁵

v.5 "*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." Pharaoh had despised the LORD in 5:2 saying "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go?" At the conclusion of this God will force not only Pharaoh but all of Egypt to acknowledge that Yahweh is God over every god and Lord over every lord.

v.6 "Moses and Aaron did so; *they did just as the LORD commanded them.*" From this point forward Moses and Aaron had absolute resolve and they do not doubt the LORD again but only speak God's word until they are safely out of Egypt.⁶

v.7 "Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh." Why this information? In order to exclude all human merit in Israel's salvation. Eighty year old men have no power to bring

⁴ cf. Proverbs 21:1

⁵ "God willed that Pharaoh should pertinaciously resist Moses, in order that the deliverance of the people might be more conspicuous." John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. II*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks, 2009), pg. 141

⁶ cf. Psalm 105:26-28

the most powerful nation in the world to its knees. Salvation is from the LORD *alone*.

Summa Theologica

In summary. God recommissions Moses. ‘Moses your job is to preach My Word, My job is accomplishment every jot and tittle. ‘My word...shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose.’⁷ What follows is a dramatic scene in which the entire Exodus is previewed in this battle of the serpents. But more importantly we see our deliverance in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the staff that became a serpent that swallowed the curse.

☆The Poison

☆The Serpent

☆The Swallowing

I. The Poison

The serpent’s venom

Please look with me at **v.8-9** “Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron,⁹ “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘*Prove yourselves by working a miracle.*’ Stop. Pharaoh is not so much asking Moses for His credentials, but he is ultimately asking for evidence that God really is who He says He is. But this is *not* a honest request. It’s like when Pontius Pilate mockingly asked Jesus “What is truth?”⁸ Whenever the seed of the serpent is confronted with the God of Heaven, he hisses out his venom of unbelief: *Prove yourself God*.

The proof is everywhere

The irony in asking for proof is that Pharaoh, just like every human being that has ever lived, has *all the proof that they need* for the True and Living God.

⁷ Isaiah 55:11

⁸ John 19:38

David says **Psalm 19:1, 4** “The heavens declare *the glory of God*, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork... Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

Job says in **Job 12:7-9** “But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; ⁸ or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. ⁹ *Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?*”

Paul says in **Acts 14:17** “...he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”⁹

The problem is never a lack of proof. As the WCF says in 1.1 “...the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable.” The problem is not proof. The problem is that fallen man has been poisoned by the serpent’s venom.

First principle: we have all been infected with the serpent’s venom

That brings us to our **first principle**: *fallen man has been poisoned by sin so that he refuses to trust the Lord*. Pharaoh is ready to believe in all the other ‘gods’ god of Egypt, but the one God he refuses to believe is the True and Living God. And this is the witness of Scripture.

In **Acts 14:8-18** the people of Lystra—though Paul healed a crippled man in their midst by the power of the risen Jesus Christ—they refused to worship Him instead attributing the miracle to Zeus and Hermes.

⁹ Paul says in **Romans 1:20** “For his invisible attributes, namely, *his eternal power and divine nature*, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”

In **Acts 16:16-24**, the people of Philippi—though Paul cast a demon out of a little girl—they refused to believe in the Jesus he preached because they served mammon instead.

In **John 11:45-52**, the Pharisees and the chief priests—though Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead—they refused to believe He was the Messiah because they were addicted to their own power and they didn't want to lose it.

Pharaoh demanded proof, but in the end like all these others, refused the very proof that was all around him.

A heart problem

Dear congregation, this is the chief poison: *unbelief in God*. Not in the mind, but in the heart. The problem with the human race is not an intellectual problem. It's a heart problem. Children, boys and girls do you know what the difference is between an intellectual problem and a heart problem is? Try to remember back when you first learned your math facts. $2 + 2$. Perhaps at first you got that problem wrong. $2 + 2 = 5$. But then you were taught correctly, and shown how to do math. $2 + 2 = 4$. The intellectual problem is taken care of. But what if a little boy insisted that it equals 5? And no matter how much you taught him and demonstrated to him that it equals 4, he stubbornly insisted it equals 5? What is his problem? His heart. He doesn't want to believe.

Madness in their hearts

Pharaoh had a heart problem. He was infected with the serpent's poison. And no matter how much proof he had, it would never be enough. Sin made him insane. **Ecclesiastes 9:3** says "...the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and *madness* is in their hearts while they live." This is what the serpent did to our first parents in the garden. His first lie was designed to bend and twist our hearts toward God. Essentially he told Eve: "you can *either* obey God in not eating the forbidden fruit, *or* you can be happy in eating fruit. *But* you can't both

obey God *and* be happy.”¹⁰ That’s precisely what the gods of Egypt offered Pharaoh. In essence, ‘...if you serve us, you can be happy. But if you serve Yahweh, you all your happiness will disappear.’

Is this poison in your heart?

If you are here this morning, and you have *not yet* embraced the Lord Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords, the One who is worthy of all of your heart, soul, and mind, may I suggest to you that this is the lie that you are believing? Your problem is *not* a lack of proof for God. Your problem is *not* that you don’t believe in miracles. In fact, as one author puts it “Those who deny the God of Scripture are the great believers in miracles, because they see the universe as the product of chance: they affirm [that something came from nothing].”¹¹ Dear unbelieving friend, you don’t need more proof. You need the poison removed. You need the God of all mercy to heal you, to suck the poison out, to take out your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. This is where the Christian worldview begins: not what you can do to heal yourself, but what God must do. You are in a hopeless situation on your own. You're poisoned all the way down, to the very depths of your soul. And your only hope is if God invades the throne room of your heart and heals and restores your soul. Let’s see how He does that.

II. The Serpent

Whose staff is this?

What does God tell Moses to do when Pharaoh demands proof? Halfway through v.9 “...then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.’ [v.10] So Moses and Aaron went

¹⁰ See Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2016), pg. 68ff

¹¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Commentaries on the Pentateuch: Exodus*, Vallecito, CA.,: Ross House Books, 2004), pg. 78

to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. *Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent.*” The **first** question here is regarding the staff. Is Aaron’s staff different staff than Moses’ staff? No this is the same staff. All the signs in Egypt were to be done with the same staff. **Exodus 4:17** “...take in your hand this staff, *with which you shall do the signs.*” This was the first sign done in Egypt with the staff. Sometimes the staff is in Aaron’s possession like here or in **Exodus 7:19, 8:5, 8:16**; and sometimes it is in Moses’ possession.¹² But one thing is vital to remember, this staff is called in **4:20** “the staff of God.” Hold onto that.

Why a serpent?

Secondly, this is a great miracle, that God would turn this staff into a serpent. This is no problem for God since He created all things by the word of His power. The question here is: *why a serpent?* Would this serpent be significant in some way to Pharaoh? Absolutely. As Joel Beeke notes that “Snakes were feared in Egypt and used as symbols of power...The Pharaoh’s crown featured...[an] upright cobra as a symbol of the patron goddess of Egypt who supposedly gave Pharaoh his power.”¹³ When the staff was turned into the serpent, God was proclaiming His Lordship over Pharaoh. But as always, there is a deeper magic.

Serpents in Scripture

What is the significance of serpents in Scripture? The serpent is who deceived Eve causing the fall of humanity - **Genesis 3:1-5**. As a result, the serpent was forever cursed by God - **Genesis 3:14**.

Therefore all manner of evil is identified with the serpent.

- Anger and Violence - **Genesis 49:17**

¹² cf. 7:14-15, 17; 10:13; 14:16

¹³ *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, Ed. Joel Beeke, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), pg. 94

- Idolatry - **Deuteronomy 32:33**¹⁴
- Drunkenness - **Proverbs 23:32**
- Impatience and grumbling - **Numbers 21:4-9**
- Apostasy - **2 Corinthians 11:3**
- Persecution - **Revelation 12:15**

Villain after villain is identified with the serpent.

- All the reprobate are called the seed of the serpent - **Genesis 3:15**
- Wicked rulers. **Psalm 58:4** “They have venom like *the venom of a serpent.*”
- Evil men. **Psalm 140:3** “...under their lips is *the venom of asps.*”
- Pharisees. **Matthew 23:33** “*You serpents, you brood of vipers,* how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”

The serpent is nearly¹⁵ universally depicted as evil in Scripture. So then ask yourself, why in the world would God transform Aaron’s staff—*the very staff of God* into a serpent—*the very manifestation of evil*? Don’t you see loved ones? What happened in Pharaoh’s court was a prefiguring of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Aaron cast down the staff of God, prefiguring God sending down His Son.
The staff became a serpent prefiguring the Son taking on the curse.

Our 2nd Principle:

That brings us to our **second principle**: *In order to cure mankind of the serpent’s venom—sin, God’s Son came down as a serpent.* This is not the only place we see salvation coming in the form of a serpent. Please turn with me to **Numbers 21**. Here we read of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness. Picking up in v.4

“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people

¹⁴ cf. v.15-17, 21

¹⁵ cf. Matthew 10:16

spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ *Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.* ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that *he take away the serpents from us.*” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the Lord said to Moses, “*Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.*” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. *And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*”

Israel sins against the Lord, he punishes them with serpents that bring death. They pray for salvation. God saves them through a bronze serpent being lifted up on a pole. And this serpent unmistakably is pointing to Christ. **John 3:14** says “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*”

Informatory Use

There are other animals that represent the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (**John 1:29**). He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who conquers all his enemies (**Revelation 5:5**). But those animals represent something about Christ *personally*. He is the Lamb—because He is the innocent sacrifice. He is the Lion—because He is the sovereign King. Those animals make sense. But the serpent does not. The serpent is evil itself, wickedness itself, the cursed one of God. Why would Jesus identify with the most loathed creature in creation? Because that is who we are. The Lion and the Lamb represent Him. The serpent represents us. In order to rescue us from the serpent, He had to become everything the serpent represents. When Jesus came down and went to the cross, He became the greatest sinner *by imputation*. God *charged Him* with our sin. **2 Corinthians 5:21** “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...” What does that look like? A serpent. Jonathan Edwards says here:

“Sin, our spiritual disease, is in [Scripture] compared to the poison of the serpent...So [Scripture] represents the Messiah as set forth as a sinner, appearing in the form of sinners, and of a great sinner...He was treated as the greatest of sinners...being set forth in the form of a great sinner, He was as it were exhibited in the form of a very venomous serpent, according to the manner of representing things in [Scripture] for there great sinners are represented as poisonous serpents.”¹⁶

Celebratory Use

Dear congregation, taste and see the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Savior! Pharaoh representing sinful unbelieving man tells God to “prove himself.” God owes sinful man nothing. He has already given us every proof we need. But what has does God do for you and me? He gives the greatest proof of His love for sinful man. He casts down His own Son to the earth. And He didn’t come as some great dignitary, someone important like a politician or a general of an army or a man of great wealth. Nor did He come as just an ordinary man. He was cast down to the earth and He became the most cursed thing that ever has or ever will be. The Son of God became a curse, to take away our curse. **Galatians 3:13** “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” He became the serpent—sin incarnate, sin by imputation—all for our sake, all to prove His love. Oh that we would have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God that surpasses all knowledge. No greater love could be conceived. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹⁷ Whoever looks to that Son turned serpent on the tree, will be saved.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pg. 653-654

¹⁷ John 3:16

III. The Swallowing

The dark arts

How does Pharaoh react when he sees Aaron’s staff transforming into a serpent? Please look at **v.11** “Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. [v.12] For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents.” Now we know exactly who these men are. Paul tells us in **2 Timothy 3:8** their names are Jannes¹⁸ and Jambres.¹⁹ Paul calls them out because they are “...men who oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.” Jannes and Jambres—Pharaoh’s sorcerers—were into the occult. **v.11** says they practiced *secret arts*. The Hebrew word is the same word from **Genesis 3:24** to describe the flaming sword the cherubim used to keep man out of the garden. The secret arts is the same thing as the flaming sword of the angels. In other words, Jannes and Jambres were using demonic powers—the power of fallen angels—in order to conjure up their magic. This was not some sleight of hand these sorcerers produced as some commentators think. The narrative in no way suggests that these sorcerers faked it. Furthermore, as one author notes, this “... conflict [is] between the living God and the demonic powers which Egypt trusted.”²⁰ The conflict wasn’t between God and some cheap performer of parlor tricks, it was between the seed of the Woman and the seed of Serpent, and the Serpent was employing all His satanic powers to win. His dark agents also produced staffs that actually turned into serpents.²¹ **Revelation 16:14** speaks of demonic spirits who can perform signs.

¹⁸ Ἰάννης iannēs “he vexed”

¹⁹ Ἰαμβρῆς iambrēs “foamy healer”

²⁰ Rushdoony, pg. 78

²¹ “It is both foolish and mischievous to underestimate the strength of our great Enemy. The one that permitted to transport our Savior from the wilderness to the temple at Jerusalem, and the one who was able to show Him “all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time” (Luke 4:5), would have no difficulty in empowering his emissaries to transform their rods into serpents.” A.W. Pink, *Gleanings In Exodus*, pg. 95-96. <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pink/Gleanings%20In%20Exodus%20-%20Arthur%20W.%20Pink.pdf>

Counterfeit religion

Now what we need to see here is that these sorcerers represent how counterfeit religion seeks to turn away persons from the True and Living God. This happened in Paul's day. In **Acts 13:8** Paul was preaching the Word of God to the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, "...but Elymas the magician...opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul way from the faith." That's the goal of all counterfeit religion: to turn away persons from the faith. And they have one method: *imitation*. Just as Jannes and Jambres were able to produce these serpents that looked like Aaron's serpent, so all counterfeit religion can produce certain virtues that look like Biblical Christianity. Mormonism looks moral. Islam looks devout. New Age looks spiritual. Postmodernism looks humble. Statism looks dependable. But in the end, all these are shown to be counterfeits because none of them can deal with man's greatest problem: sin.

The end of false religion

Look what happens to these counterfeits at the end of **v.12** "But Aaron's staff *swallowed up* their staffs." The Hebrew word for *swallowed up* is the same word used in **Exodus 15:12** to describe Pharaoh and his army being *swallowed up* in the Red Sea.²² In other words, this is a foreshadowing of Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh and all of Egypt. Just as the Aaron's serpent swallowed up the serpents of Jannes and Jambres, *so Yahweh was going to swallow up Pharaoh in the Red Sea*. Pharaoh saw his end. God would drown him and his army *and* bring Israel to Himself to the mountain of God (**Exodus 3:12**). The Exodus was a twofold act: **1)** God swallowed up Israel's enemies and **2)** God brought Israel near to Himself as He promised that they would be His people, and He would be their God. How does this help us understand the gospel?

²² cf. L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*, (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2020), pg. 59

Our 3rd Principle:

That brings us to our **third principle**: *Christ swallows up our enemies and brings us into union with Himself.* Consider how He who became a serpent for our sake swallowed up all our enemies.

1. Christ swallowed the devil

Just as Aaron's staff swallowed up the sorcerer's serpents, so Christ when He was cast down to earth defeated the devil for us. We could never defeat Satan. But Christ became a serpent and swallowed him up on the cross. **John 12:31** "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out." And this victory will be completed on that Great Day. **Revelation 20:10** "...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where...[he] will be tormented day and night forever and ever." Beloved Christ has already devoured and will devour the great enemy of your soul.

2. Christ swallowed up our sin

Just as Aaron's staff swallowed up those serpents venom and all, so Christ swallowed up all the sin that has poisoned you. The venom of sin has reached the depth of your soul, but Christ the serpent swallower has gulped up all the poison on the cross. **Colossians 2:14** God "...canceled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Child of God, your sin was devoured on the cross by the crimson red blood of the Lamb. You have no more debt in God's courtroom. You are innocent before Him.

3. Christ swallowed up death

Just as Aaron's staff swallowed up those serpents that were symbols of death, so Christ swallowed up death for us. Since the fall, no man has been able to escape their own death. All men die. But those who have Christ as their serpent slayer are saved from the second death. He swallowed death itself. **1 Corinthians 15:54-55** "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is

your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Dear church, your future death has already died when Christ died, you will never truly taste death. Your death will be a portal into everlasting life where you will be with God forever.

4. Christ swallowed the wrath of God

Just as Aaron's staff swallowed up those serpents cursed by God, so Jesus swallowed up the curse and wrath of God for us. Oh there is nothing more dreadful than to be under the wrath of God. **Isaiah 33:14** says "The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless: "Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire?" But oh dear saint, Christ swallowed every last drop of the wrath of God. He took the cup His Father Him and drank it down to the very dregs. Your future has no wrath it it.

But the last thing that Jesus gulped down is the most delightful gospel truth of all.

5. Christ swallowed us up

Just as Aaron's staff swallowed those serpents and they became his food, so Christ made us His food and brought us into union Himself never to be departed from on another. Jonathan Edwards says here

"[Christ] destroyed sin and the devil, and so swallowed the serpents in that sense. So he received and embraced sinners, (that are in themselves serpents) by his love and grace, so that they became as it were his pleasant food, and so he swallowed down serpents."²³

This is the most delightful truth of this passage. Dear Christian, dear man of God, woman of God, child of God, you have been brought into union with Christ. You are now inseparable from Him. You are no longer just you, you and Christ are joined together. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer

²³ Edwards, pg. 718

I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”²⁴ Dear friends, the gospel offer is Christ Himself.²⁵ All these other things that the Serpent Son swallowed, He did so in order to take every obstacle out of His way in order that He may have you. Christ wants you. The swallowing of Satan, sin, death, and the wrath of God are not the main treasure of the gospel. All those things must happen, but they are not the greatest truth of the gospel. The greatest truth of the gospel is that you have become Christ’s pleasant food. You are now one with Him, and He with you. Never to separated, never to part from one another, You are Christ’s, Christ is yours. The Son of God has conquered you. You are His prize, and He is yours. The staff became a serpent and swallowed the curse so that You could be united to Christ forever, world without end.

²⁴ Galatians 2:20

²⁵ Ferguson, pg. 47