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Throw Your Staff Before Pharaoh and It Will Become a Snake

6:28 to 7:13

Throw your staff before Pharaoh and it will become a snake DIG: How is Moses like God to Pharaoh? How did Moses overcome his speaking handicap? How and why will God harden Pharaoh's heart? Why would Pharaoh want a miracle performed? What surprises you about the sorcerers' power? Where does it come from? What is the meaning of Aaron's snake swallowing theirs?

REFLECT: We have often heard the argument for boldness in evangelism: You may be the only Bible those whom you come in contact with will ever see. Taking a cue from this passage, we should take this a step further: You may be the only "God" they see. Or, perhaps more accurately, you may be the first "God" they see. As a people recreated in God's image, we should be a means by which the good news of God's salvation spreads. Do you preach the Gospel at all times, even without using words?

Scripture now resumes the narrative interrupted where verse 13 left off before the genealogy. Now when God spoke to Moses in Egypt, He said to him, "I AM ADONAI. Tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, everything I tell you." Moses repeated the complaint he had made in verse 12. But Moshe said to ADONAI, "Since I speak with a lack of eloquence and faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me" (6:28-30)? The same question remained unanswered. How will YHVH respond?

God continued to insist that Moses take action. The beginning of YHVH's response to him is emphatic. The word **see** is an imperative. ADONAI is urging Moses to carefully consider the words that will follow. He would continue using a powerful metaphor, saying: **See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet (7:1).** Moses would operate with divine authority and, like the true God, would make His word known through the prophet. Therefore, Aaron became a prophet in the sense that Moses became a God to Pharaoh. As a prophet would be the spokesman for God, Aaron was the spokesman for Moses. At the very least, this declaration put Moses on an equal

footing with **Pharaoh**, who was **himself** considered a god in ancient **Egypt**.¹⁰¹

God empowered **Moses** when **He** said: **You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country (7:2)**. So the procedure is that **God** would speak to **Moses**, and **Moses** would speak to **Aaron**, and **Aaron** would speak to **Pharaoh**. The message was always the same: **Let the Israelites go. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart** (see comments on 4:21), **and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you (7:2-4a)**. **Moses** was not to have any unreal expectations. **Pharaoh's** rejection would be part of **God's** plan.

Pharaoh's hardness of **heart** would result in the ten plagues **of judgment** upon **Egypt**. **Then I will lay My hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out My people, the Israelites**. Earlier, **Amenhotep II** responded to **Moses'** request that **the Israelites** be released by saying: **I do not know ADONAI (5:2)**. **God** now announces that one of **His** purposes for the coming plagues is that **the Egyptians will know that I am ADONAI when I stretch out My hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it (7:4b-5)**. **The plagues would serve as a rude awakening to Pharaoh**. Although the primary purpose for bringing the ten plagues upon **Egypt** was for judgment, a secondary reason was for evangelism. Some **Egyptians** feared **what ADONAI had said** and acted upon it (**9:20**). And perhaps, some **Egyptians** even participated in the exodus with **the nation of Isra'el**.

Moses and Aaron obeyed God and did just as He commanded them (7:6). A literal reading of this verse contains a repetition: *And **Moses and Aaron** did as **God commanded them**, thus **they** did*. Repetition is common in Hebrew for the purpose of emphasis. **Moses and Aaron** were completely faithful in proclaiming **the LORD's** message. In the last few chapters **Moses** had doubted **God's** word and had been reluctant to carry out **His** calling. But that was a thing of the past. From this point on, to the crossing of the Red Sea, **Moses** was a man with a full heart toward **God**, with no hesitation.

Moses was eighty years old and Aaron was eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh (7:7). In the Hebrew culture, the first-born son had many privileges. Nevertheless, **God** had continually shown that He was not bound by cultural mores. Here **Aaron** is mentioned as being second to **Moses**. This was not the first time **YHVH** had chosen the younger over the older brother. **He** had chosen Abram over Hebron, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau and Joseph over Reuben. The ages are also important. Ages of prominent figures in the TaNaKh, are given when a major event was about to occur (**Genesis 16:16, 17:24-25**). The ten

plagues were about to start. Humanly speaking, their ages put them at a great disadvantage, but with **God** on **their** side, not even **Pharaoh** could succeed (**Romans 8:31**).

Knowing that **Pharaoh** would question **Moses'** and **Aaron's** authority, **God** instructed **them** how to respond. **Then ADONAI said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a miracle,' then say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become a snake"** (7:8-9). This **snake** confrontation foreshadows **the LORD's** humiliation of **Egypt** from this point through the crossing of the Red Sea. The word that connects the two events is the word **swallowed**, which appears in **7:12** where **Aaron's staff swallowed up the staffs of the Egyptian magicians**, and in **15:12** where **the Egyptian** army was **swallowed up** in the Red Sea. In addition, **the staff** that **swallowed up the magicians' snakes** points to **the staff** that would cause the waters to overwhelm **the Egyptian** army (**14:16** and **26**).

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as ADONAI commanded (7:10a). Although Scripture does not always mention Aaron's name in connection with the visits to Pharaoh, he always accompanied Moses. They meet Pharaoh for the second time. The basic pattern established here will be repeated in one form or another in connection with each of the ten plagues. **Moses** and/or **Aaron** will perform a miracle to demonstrate that **God** is superior to **Pharaoh** and **his** gods. **Pharaoh's magicians** will try to duplicate the miracle by **their** secret arts. Eventually the plague caused by the miracle will subside, bringing relief to **the Egyptians**. Then **Pharaoh** will **harden his heart** further and continue to refuse to free **the Jews** and **Moses** or **Aaron** will perform another miracle, bringing on the next plague.¹⁰²



Aaron began the sequence when **he threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials and it became a snake (7:10b)**, just as **Moses** had done earlier (**4:3**). In doing this, **the Israelite** leaders attacked **Pharaoh** and **his people** at the very heart of **their** beliefs.

In the first place, an image of an enraged cobra was placed on the front of **the king's** crown. **The Egyptians** believed that it was charged with divine sovereignty and potency. As such, it was considered the symbol of **Pharaoh's** power. It symbolized his divinity and majesty. When **Aaron threw his staff-like snake down in front of Pharaoh, he** was challenging **Pharaoh's** sovereignty, and **Pharaoh** clearly understood the symbolic implication - the **the God of Moshe** was more powerful than the powers of darkness and the gods of **Pharaoh**.

In the second place, casting down the staff challenged the power of **Egyptian** magic as described in many of **Egypt's** mythological books. There were many examples of **Egyptian** priests performing feats of the occult, including changing inanimate objects into animals. One text tells of a priest who made a wax crocodile that came to life when he threw it into a lake. Later he bent down, picked it up, and it became wax again.¹⁰³

Pharaoh responded to the challenge when **he summoned his own wise men** and illusionists, or **sorcerers**, two of whom were named **Jannes and Jambres (Second Timothy 3:8)**. At that time, **the Egyptian magicians imitated** the miracle of **Aaron's staff with their secret arts**. Only **God** can create life (**Genesis 1:1**). **Each one threw down his staff and it** appeared to become **a snake**. These **Egyptian magicians** were mentioned centuries earlier in the days of Joseph (**Genesis 41:8 and 24**), and the Babylonian magicians were to be found centuries later in the days of **Dani'el (Dani'el 2:10 and 27, 4:7, 5:11)**. We learn from this that Satan can *imitate* miracles. This is why we need to be very careful about believing that all miracles are from **God**. During the Great Tribulation, Satan will be able to *imitate* numerous **miracles**. He will be able to deceive the entire world to worship the antichrist **and display all kinds of counterfeit miracles signs and wonders (Second Thessalonians 2:9-12 and Revelation 13:3, 11-15)**. The test case is never miracles alone; *the test case is always conformity to the Word of God and who gets the glory (Deuteronomy 18)*. **But God's** power was superior to Satan's power, and **Aaron's staff, or snake, swallowed up their staffs, or snakes (7:11-12)**.

Yet unimpressed, **Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said (7:13)**. This was the first of several times that we are told that **Pharaoh's heart hardened** more and more. **He was not at all moved by the performance of Aaron, arguing that Aaron, like his own magicians, achieved the miracle by illusion**. The hardening of **Pharaoh's heart** has been debated for centuries. In the book of **Exodus**, **God** appears to **harden his heart** nine times (**4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 20 and 27, 11:10, 14:4 and 8**), while **Pharaoh** appears to **harden his own heart** an equal number of times (**7:13, 14 and 22, 8:15, 19 and 32, 9:7, 34 and 35**). The problem

seems to be that **YHVH** initiates the process (**4:21** and **7:3**) before **Pharaoh** starts to harden **his** own **heart**. As a result, some have said that **Pharaoh** was a puppet with no will of **his** own, that **Ha'Shem** had forced **him** to harden **his heart** against **his** will. So when **Pharaoh** hardened **his heart**, **he** had set the stage for the ten plagues to fall upon **Egypt**. But although **God** is sovereign and does whatever **He** pleases (**Psalm 135:6**), **He** will not violate a person's free will. We can say no to **God** and make it stick! **Exodus** tells us that **God hardened Pharaoh's heart**, but it also tells us that **Pharaoh** deliberately **hardened his own heart** over and over again. Let's take a look at these eighteen references more closely.

The first two references (**4:21** and **7:3**) state that **ADONAI** will harden **Pharaoh's heart** at some future time. The Hebrew verb used there is *hazaq*, and it means *to be strong*. In those earlier passages the verb was in the imperfect tense, indicating uncompleted action; the hardening of **Pharaoh's heart** had not yet occurred.

But the next ten references indicate that **Pharaoh hardened his own heart**, with the only exception being **9:12**. The final six references tell us that **God hardened Pharaoh's heart**, with the only exception being **14:4**. In those passages the verb is an imperfect introduced by a *waw* conversive that makes it act like a perfect. The perfect tense signifies a completed action. It was not that **Pharaoh's heart** was in the process of being **hardened**, because it was already **hardened** at that point in time.¹⁰⁴

The picture that emerges, then, is that **ADONAI**, on the basis of **His** foreknowledge, predicted (**4:21** and **7:3**) and announced that **He** would **harden Pharaoh's heart**, but only after **Pharaoh** had **hardened his own heart**. **God** then confirmed that hardening process in the last six references, beginning with **His** own involvement in **9:12**, after **Pharaoh's** willful **hardening** had passed the point of no return. Although mankind's sin is **God's** sorrow, the time comes when **He** gives hopelessly wicked people over to the sin they have chosen, and **they are without excuse** and judged accordingly (**Romans 1:18-2:3**).¹⁰⁵

Pharaoh is a typical example of an unbeliever. **He** asks for proof, a miracle that will attest to the truth and power of **God**. Then **ADONAI** responds. However, even with the physical evidence before **him**, **Pharaoh** does not believe. **He** simply will not be persuaded, no matter how much evidence is placed before **his** eyes because there is never enough evidence for unbelief. This is true of unbelievers throughout the ages. Even many of those who saw **Jesus**, heard **Him** preach and witnessed **His miracles** did not believe in **Him**, for **though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand (Matthew 13:13)**. The same is true today. People cannot be talked into the Kingdom of Heaven.



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People need to have their hearts changed by the will and power of **the Creator**. There is no other way.¹⁰⁶