

A Prologue to the Plagues
Exodus 7:8–13
January 18, 2026

Generally, when reading a new book, my practice has been to read the prologue, the preface, and the introduction *first*. Bottom line: if the publisher put it *before* the book itself, I've long assumed the author thought I should read it *before* diving in.

And for a while, that practice has served me well. Until it didn't—a couple years ago when I picked up a fairly long novel, one I'd wanted to read for a long time. Per my typical practice, I began with the introductory material. And to my horror, page two contained multiple significant spoilers, main characters that died were revealed, and major plot points were told that shouldn't have been known for a couple hundred more pages.

Though I ended up finishing that book, I'm still not over that introductory material. In *many* ways, it ruined it for me.

A number of authors have called our passage today a prologue; it's a prologue to the plagues.¹ It functions as something of a paradigm for what follows. And it *absolutely* foreshadows what's to come.

And yet, in *this* case, it won't ruin anything. Instead, considering these verses will keep you from missing what's to come. Because this prologue, this preview, keeps you from misreading it.

1. A Preview of the Plagues (vv. 8-10)

Last week's text *ended* with, **Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three, when they spoke to Pharaoh** (7:7). The Lord had *already* told them much of what was going to happen when they went to Pharaoh, at least in broad strokes. After they said what the Lord told them to say (7:2), the Lord told them that Pharaoh wouldn't listen; his heart would be hardened. And because of that, God said He would **multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt** (7:3).

And that's what is about to happen. Verse 8: **Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Work a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh.'"**

Rather than a plague, our passage today is sometimes called a "demonstration,"² largely because what happens in our text doesn't affect the Egyptians in any significant way. Again, it's a prologue that previews some of what's to come. There are multiple elements of the plagues ahead that *first* occur, in a somewhat lesser fashion, *here*.

For example, before each plague God gives instruction. He guides them at each step. In verse 8, He's telling them what's *going* to happen before it happens. He knows that Pharaoh will ask them to "work a miracle." It's *when*, not *if*.

As the rest of the section will make clear, asking this does *not* mean Pharaoh is interested in being persuaded. Maybe he aimed to expose them as charlatans.³ Or, even more likely, maybe he wanted to show off what *his* magicians could do. And thereby he could show the power of the "gods" he worshipped.

Or—to be more specific—the power *he* wielded as the manifestation of one of those gods. We mentioned this back in Exodus 3, but I remind us today that on Pharaoh's crown was a cobra—

¹ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 97.

² Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 185.

³ Motyer, 98.

hood raised, staring back at you. The cobra was the foremost symbol of pharaoh, reflecting his claim to divine royalty, sovereignty, and power.⁴ In the Egyptians' mind, he ruled the land as a god.⁵ I didn't mention this last time, but there's a particular Egyptian ritual that captured this pagan ideology. Picture this scene. Whenever a new Pharaoh was enthroned, he would stand before his cobra crown, and *address* his crown with these words: "O Great One, . . . O Fiery Snake! Let there be terror of me like the terror of thee. Let there be fear of me like the fear of thee. Let there be awe of me like the awe of thee."⁶

In Egypt, the snake signified more than a snake. And this encounter did as well. So, before we get too far into this text, and into the account of the plagues, we ought to clearly identify the combatants. The chapters ahead—the conflict to come—is *not* primarily between Moses and Pharaoh, nor between Moses and the Egyptian magicians, nor between Israel and Egypt. It is, as one man writes, a "heavenly combat between the God of the Hebrews and the deities of Egypt."⁷ If you want to understand what's to come *rightly*, grasping this is vital.

And with all that in mind, what God tells Moses and Aaron to do might make more sense. Verse 9: **When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, "Work a miracle," then you shall say to Aaron, "Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent."**

This wasn't just a parlor trick; it was a sign aimed precisely at the very symbol of Pharaoh's supposed power.⁸ The Lord God of heaven is not afraid to pick a fight with an idol. Verse 10: **So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the LORD had commanded.**

By the way, last week we talked about Moses "turning the page," from the fearful doubting proclivities that marked the first six chapters of this book. So, for another preview of what's to come in these ten plagues. The Lord gives instruction concerning these encounters with Pharaoh. And, repeatedly, when the Lord instructs, Moses and Aaron do what He commands.

Verse 10 continues: **And Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent.** Interestingly, the word for "serpent" here is a different one from the word used back in chapter four (4:3). Some have gone so far as to say it *leans* more toward a crocodile. Some go farther than that.⁹ But I think it's *safe* to say that this staff turned serpent was *definitely* not your garden-variety snake. There's an emphasis on size, on fearsomeness, and on hostility.¹⁰

All this is preview of what's to come in the plagues. God gives instruction. Moses and Aaron obey. Then, during an encounter, a symbolic action is taken. In this case, Aaron throws down his staff in front of Pharaoh. Then, after that symbolic action, what God purposes comes about.¹¹

All this is preview, preparing us for what's ahead. And *one* aspect of the plagues this prologue foreshadows is Yahweh's power.

2. The Power of the Plagues (vv. 11–13)

Verse 11: **Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts.**

⁴ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 110.

⁵ John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, 93.

⁶ Currid, 92.

⁷ Currid, 86; Motyer, 97.

⁸ Ryken, 110.

⁹ See Michael Morales' *Exodus: Old and New* if you're interested in dragons, 58.

¹⁰ Motyer, 98; Currid, 86.

¹¹ See Stuart, 186.

Note the three descriptors for this group—wise men, sorcerers, and magicians. In the ancient pagan world, it would *not* have been uncommon for these types to be around, even to be at the behest of someone like Pharaoh. Because in Egypt religious practices were closely linked to magic.¹² Temples had libraries full of ritual texts studied by their pagan priests. It's those kinds of magicians that are going to be in a few of the plague accounts—at least early on.

And here, *after* Aaron's staff turned into a serpent, these magicians **did the same with their secret arts**. The question has been debated for a long time. Did they accomplish this feat by sleight of hand?¹³ Was this an example of snake-charming, putting a cobra into what's called a state of catalepsy, making it *appear* rigid—momentarily?¹⁴ Or was this *pure* evil, not unlike the demonic activity we see in the Gospels and the book of Acts?

Whatever they did, it was **with their secret arts**. Verse 12 tells us more precisely what they did: **For each one threw down his staff and they turned into serpents**. Note that Aaron's staff turned into a serpent—in the singular. But when Pharaoh calls all his sorcerers in, they throw their staffs—in the plural—down; and they, of course, turn into *multiple* serpents.

A quick reminder of the point. Aaron's action wasn't merely a parlor trick; it was a sign aimed precisely at the very symbol of Pharaoh's supposed power.¹⁵ Further, what the magicians followed with—sleight of hand or not—was no surprise to Yahweh. Again, He's not afraid to pick a fight.

Because He knows what will happen at the end of verse 12: **But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs**. This is a preview of the plagues ahead; and it's a preview of power.

Further, the role of Aaron's staff is not incidental. Maybe you remember the end of Genesis—immediately *after* Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in Egypt—they're headed to meet with Pharaoh. And Joseph tells his brothers that when they're asked their occupation, they're to say, **Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth**. And then Moses tells us *why* they were to say that: **for every shepherd is loathsome to the Egyptians** (Gen. 46:34).

If we fast-forward a couple hundred years, it's unlikely the superiority complex would have improved. Relations between Egypt and the Hebrews certainly hadn't. So, if that contempt lingered, and Exodus suggests it did (Ex. 8:26), a tool used to guide sheep would *not* have been considered impressive, *especially* up against the staff of a magician.¹⁶ Their “wand,” as it were. In the Egyptians' mind, this was an unfair fight.

And they were right. This is yet another preview. Aaron's staff will come to represent more than that which directs sheep. Repeatedly and convincingly, it will represent God and His power.¹⁷

The use of Aaron's staff is foreshadowing. So is the verb used in the phrase, **Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs**. The only other time Exodus uses this verb is in reference to the Egyptians being swallowed up by the sea.¹⁸

Pharaoh sought to expose Moses and Aaron. Then he brings in his best—the wise men, the sorcerers, and the magicians. And so God shows Pharaoh what's *about* to happen.

However, verse 13: **Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them**.

We mentioned this aspect of the plagues a little last week. Again, it's important to note that Exodus affirms *both* realities, that is, God hardens Pharaoh's heart (7:3); and Pharaoh hardens his *own* heart (8:32). Scripture says both. We affirm both. God is sovereign; and man is responsible.

¹² Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 160.

¹³ Stuart, 195.

¹⁴ Currid, 95.

¹⁵ Ryken, 110.

¹⁶ Stuart, 195.

¹⁷ Stuart, 198.

¹⁸ Morales, 59.

However, this week I might point out something in the Egyptian worldview that might further illuminate what's going on with this repeated refrain. Because Pharaoh was considered to be the incarnation of the gods, his heart was thought to be sovereign over all of creation.¹⁹ Or to say it another way, in the Egyptian mind, Pharaoh's heart was considered to be the all-controlling factor in history and in society.²⁰ If he purposed it. If He desired it. It came about.

So, when Exodus says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, *one* of the things it's pointing to is that Pharaoh's supposed reign is a ruse. The so-called god-king can't even govern his own heart. Or as Proverbs 21:1 makes clear: **The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.**

In fact, verse 13 ends on that note: **Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.** This is God's design. Aaron's staff swallowing up the pseudo-serpents put on display the power of God. So does the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. God purposed all this. In fact, in chapter 9 the Lord will say *this* about Pharaoh, to Pharaoh: **For this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power** (9:16). That's Exodus 9. That's Romans 9.

All this is preview. It's previewing for Pharaoh the power of God. And it's doing so for the purposes God intends.

3. The Purpose of the Plagues

We noted the first aspect last week, in verse 3, when the Lord says, **I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders.** He won't *just* turn the Nile into blood. He won't *only* send frogs, or *only* gnats. He multiplies His signs and wonders.

And He does so, according to verse 5, so that **the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.** That is repeated in next week's text, verse 17: **Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile with the staff that is in my hand, and it will be turned to blood.** And it's not *just* the first plague that aims at revealing the Lord. Later in chapter 9, the LORD says to Pharaoh, **I will send all My plagues on you and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth** (9:14).

The purpose of the plagues is the same purpose as the genealogy in last week's text, as the burning bush back in chapter 3, as the Passover in chapter 12, and the splitting of the sea in chapter 15—that God Himself might be made known.

Which is, of course, a central purpose of the Bible in its entirety. God makes Himself known in Exodus. And then He *came* to make Himself known. Jesus would say, **This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent** (Jn. 17:3). John would write, **And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true** (1 Jn. 5:20). And Paul would say that he counts **all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord** (Phil. 3:8). God purposed to make Himself known. And in the gospel, God doesn't *merely* inform us. He conquers what enslaves us—what blinds us—so that we might know Him in fullness.

Have you seen Him? Do you know Him? He came to make Himself known.

¹⁹ Currid, 103.

²⁰ See G. K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart . . ." in *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984), 129–154.

Conclusion

The chapters ahead—Exodus 7, 8, 9, and 10—reveal God to us in some unique ways, showing us His power to conquer that which opposes Him. And our verses *today* function as something of a prologue to the plagues. It doesn't *ruin* what's ahead. Instead, it keeps us from misreading it—as we see what it previews—the power of God and His unfolding purpose.

The book of Exodus has a prologue to the plagues. But there's a prologue to the book of Exodus. I encourage you to go and read the final few verses of Genesis and then, without skipping a beat, read the first few verses of Exodus. When it switches books, it's far from abrupt. It's seamless. In Genesis 50:24, in Egypt: **Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob."** Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, **"God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here."** So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. Now these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob (Gen. 50:24—Ex. 1:1).

That's the end of Genesis read *right* into Exodus 1:1. It's the same story. In fact, Genesis helps us read Exodus rightly.

Because early in *that* book, as you know, there is a serpent. A snake is *more* than a snake *long* before Egypt or the Exodus. Almost on the first page of the Bible, we're told that a serpent will attack the seed of the woman. Exodus 1 begins with a serpentine figure, wearing a cobra on his crown. And in Exodus 7 his hood is raised, continuing to strike.

And yet Exodus goes on to show us what Genesis already told us. The plagues, and what they lead to, are a preview—a preview of the power of God. Though the serpent might attack the seed of the woman, the people of God are delivered, and the head of the serpent crushed.

He—the snake crusher—is the One we look to.