

Exodus 7

This chapter begins the contest between the real God (YHWH) and the nature “gods” and singular “god”, Pharaoh. Though we are often taught to think of this encounter as centering on the liberation of the people of Israel, this and the following chapters are focused on a contest of godly power. The reason for understanding what happens as a contest between gods is because both Israel and Egypt must come to know who YHWH is. Egypt must recognize that YHWH is the one God who has the power to defeat Pharaoh and Egypt’s God, thus causing Egypt to let Israel leave. Israel must come to see YHWH’s power so that the people will worship him as the covenant keeping liberator. The contest is not much of a contest because YHWH has made Moses “like a god to Pharaoh and Aaron shall be your prophet” meaning that Moses is superior to the supposed god, Pharaoh. We quickly learn two things, that Moses and Aaron now do exactly as God commands (meaning the brothers learned to listen) and their ages (which marks the beginning of a new literary section).

The first power encounter of this new section has to do with crocodiles. Though the scriptures usually refer to the staff becoming a snake, the Hebrew word is more often used to describe a sea monster or crocodile. The reason to choose crocodile is that the crocodile was considered a nature god named Sobek. Sobek not only created the Nile but protected it. In addition, the hieroglyph for “sovereign” contained two crocodiles. Thus, when Aaron throws down the staff (with no magic words) and it becomes a crocodile (and then eats the other crocodiles created by the magic arts) it shows that the God of the Hebrews has power over Sobek and the enchanters.

A note about the ten plagues. The first nine come in three cycles. In the first plague in each cycle (1, 4, 7) Moses is commanded to meet Pharaoh at the Nile and warn him. In the second cycle (2, 5, 8), Moses is commanded to meet Pharaoh in his palace and warn him. In the third cycle (1, 6, 9) there is no warning and plague just arrives. Next, the plagues grow in intensity and are linked in pairs (an example is the first two focus on the Nile, the second two are insects coming from the ground and so on). In addition, the plagues move upward, from the water, to the land, to the sky, to the heavens, to the sun (the god Ra) itself. Finally, all the plagues deal with nature, which Egypt worships as immutable gods, which YHWH has now turned against Egypt itself.

The second power encounter is the first of the ten plagues and has to do with the Nile turning to blood. As mentioned above, this first plague begins in the depths of the Nile. The Nile was a god and the source of life. By turning the water to blood, the entire population and economy of Egypt are put at risk. Though the magicians can emulate this plague (not sure why or where), it will be their final gasp of keeping up with Moses, Aaron, and YHWH.

Now a note about hardening Pharaoh’s heart. It has been argued that for the people to come to know YHWH’s power, YHWH must contend with Pharaoh on “equal” terms, meaning that both YHWH and Pharaoh must both bring their A-game to the contest. Only by hardening Pharaoh’s heart, meaning he will be at his most resistant, will both Israel and Egypt see the true might of YHWH.

Reflection: Over the past several hundred years people have tried to find natural causes of the plagues (red soil in the water for the blood, etc.). While such endeavors are interesting, they miss the cosmic nature of the struggle between YHWH and Pharaoh. These two were locked in a duel for both the bodies and souls of the Israelite people. Only by YHWH overcoming Pharaoh will both peoples come to know who God really is, the true ruler of heaven and earth; and who Pharaoh is, a petty, brutal tyrant and nothing more. For those of us in the 21st century, this could be a powerful reminder that all those who claim to rule over the earth are merely bit players in God’s unfolding redemption drama, and therefore, it is God who should get all glory and not those who govern us.

Questions:

1. Where do you see contests between the worship of YHWH and the worship of creatures?
2. Where do you see people pretending to be sovereign when they are not?
3. Why do you think it is important for both Israel and Egypt to “know” the God of Israel?