

Egyptian texts tell us that such magic and deception involving snakes was quite common. The shock must have been great for Moses and Aaron, probably accompanied by a sense of bewilderment at what the Lord was doing. They believed they were doing a sign given them by God, but what happened was not what they expected! Their task however, was to hold firm. When Aaron's staff 'gobbled up' the other magician's staffs (and this is, quite literally, what the Hebrew describes in verse 12), they must have realised that the Lord was leading them on a journey of signs and wonders which were something more than what they had so far been told!

As a final note, the New Testament makes one brief but rather general reference to this incident. In the centuries before Christ, the names of the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses and Aaron were thought to be 'Jannes and Jambres'. They are to be found in 2 Timothy 3:8, and were regarded as Scriptural examples of worldly people who oppose the Word of God.

Application

This passage of Scripture tells us that we can expect to be surprised if we are going about the Lord's work. This is not because of the Lord's desire to keep us on our toes or because it is some characteristic of God with which we cannot easily understand. We can expect to be surprised because our human minds are rarely capable of taking in the extent of what God is doing in our midst. I have often heard people say 'the Lord is doing X in our midst ...' or 'the Lord wants us to do Y ... in our fellowship'. This may be true, but just as Moses and Aaron were surprised by what happened and could not anticipate how things would work out in the future, so must we be prepared for the unexpected. We must certainly be obedient to what the Lord has told us to do, but if this becomes a straightjacket for what we expect to happen, then we will limit God, for He uses our obedience to do more than we expect. That is the nature of the God in whom we believe, and why we should expect to be surprised.

Adding to this idea, our passage today tells us that the Lord will sometimes work in a sequence of events to break down resistance to His will by worldly authorities (the equivalent to Pharaoh, today). People want the Lord to act immediately to complete a work, but the removal of authorities sometimes takes time and persistence. This is why obedience to the Lord, and expectation of surprises is essential. As we study the story of the plagues over the next few days, we will find that other spiritual qualities are also suggested by this classic description of a spiritual battle in the Old Testament.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is there a place for miracles such as that described in our passage, today?
2. What worldly authorities stand in the way of God's will today, and are any of them like an Egyptian Pharaoh?
3. What can we learn about doing the Lord's work in the world today, from this passage of Scripture?

Discipleship

Take time to reflect upon incidents in your own life when the unexpected has happened. Has the Lord worked through such times, or do you naturally react against such surprises? It can be scary to think that the Lord will sometimes surprise us when we are doing what we believe to be His will, and that things may work out differently from what we imagined or what we believed we were told. Nevertheless, God is almighty, and His vision for the world is far greater than ours, and we need to be obedient to a small vision so that the larger one can come into reality.

Final Prayer

We offer You our heartfelt thanks and praise great God of power and love. You make life exciting by doing things which are unheard of, unexpected, exciting, uplifting and challenging, and You invite us to participate in this, the work of Your Kingdom. Thank You, Lord. Thank You.

Prayer

Calm our spirits, Lord God, and in Your compassion and generosity, give us such peace as will enable us to serve You with confidence and integrity. May we neither panic at the thought of what we have to do for you, nor be so enthusiastic that we take over Your work with our own personal agendas. Your will, O Lord, be done by us, no more, no less. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Strengths and Weaknesses

Pray today for people who are troubled by their own weaknesses. The world is not an easy place for people who feel unable to demonstrate strength in their work, or in personal or spiritual matters. However, the Lord loves to work with people's weaknesses to show His glory, so pray that He will do this through those who need to see this encouragement.

Meditation

(elementary spiritual numbers!)

There is One God, One Creator of all the World;
One magnificent, all-powerful and ever-present God.

There are two great Testaments declaring God's Word;
The Old and the New, showing Jesus, the Christ.

There are three in God's Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
Indivisible, indestructible, all-powerful, and ever present.

There are four Gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John:
Four pictures of Christ; King and Servant, Man and God.

There were five loaves broken to feed five thousand,
The miracle of Jesus to feed those whom God loves.

There are six days for our work, but only one for rest,
The principle of Sabbath, not of worship, but of rest.

There are seven churches in Revelation, around the world,
Under judgment, as today, but awaiting their Lord.

Bible Study - Exodus 7:8-13

⁸ The LORD told Moses and Aaron, ⁹ 'When Pharaoh challenges you to perform a miracle, say to Aaron "take you staff and throw it on the ground in front of Pharaoh," and it will become a serpent. ¹⁰ So when Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh, they did as the Lord had commanded. Aaron flung his staff on the ground right in front of Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh responded by calling for the wise men and sorcerers; and they, the magicians of Egypt, did just the same with their secret arts. ¹² Each of them threw down his staff, and they became serpents; but Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs! ¹³ But Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.

Review

Today's reading begins with instructions from the Lord to Moses and Aaron concerning what they should do next in their struggle with Pharaoh. We who read the story of Exodus after it happened, know that these instructions set in motion the first of a number of 'signs and wonders' which would eventually lead to the release of the Israelites from slavery, but Moses

and Aaron were required to be obedient, step by step. The first step required of them was to perform before Pharaoh the first sign that He had given Moses (4:1-5), and even in the midst of their uncertainty (6:30) and the disillusionment of the people (6:9), they were obedient. It was an essential first step in what has come to be called the 'Ten Plagues' of Egypt.

Moses and Aaron 'came before' Pharaoh, and Aaron threw down his staff in front of Pharaoh and his court, presumably picking it up again in the manner described when God told Moses how to do the sign (4:4). Pharaoh, however, appeared in full command of events; summoning his own magicians who were able to produce the same effects with their own techniques of magic (7:11). Pharaoh had confidence in the abilities of his own sorcerers, and the aim of this show of strength on his part was presumably to further demoralise Moses and Aaron. As a dictator whose existence depended on his ability to know what was happening everywhere in his Empire, he would have known that these two leaders were in trouble with their own people. Their previous efforts to bargain with him for the release of the Israelites had been a failure (5:1-9), and after the conditions of slavery had been made worse (the controversial withdrawal of straw supplies, 5:7), the Israelites were no longer willing to follow Moses and Aaron (6:9,12). It is probable that Pharaoh allowed Moses and Aaron into his presence to perform their sign so that he could belittle them, and get rid of both them and the threat they presented to his rule in Egypt. His plan very nearly worked, up to the moment when Aaron's staff 'swallowed up' the staffs of the Egyptian magicians (7:12)!

This sudden turn of events reminds us that the Lord was in control, not Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's response was to harden his heart. Whereas Moses and Aaron had learned from their earlier defeat at Pharaoh's hands that they needed to stay close to what the Lord told them (6:13,29), Pharaoh was unable to deal with defeat in any way other than to block himself off from it (7:13). The spiritual lesson is clear to us, and doubtless, Moses and Aaron would have been emboldened at the final, unexpected twist to the sign they performed at the Lord's request. By being faithful and doing what they were told, they had set in motion a series of events which the Lord used to inflict the first small but significant defeat upon Pharaoh. More would come!

After this first 'sign', Scripture records nine other events, traditionally called 'plagues', which subsequently afflicted Egypt; water and blood, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts and darkness (7:14-10:29). We will study these over coming days. After these, a further most terrible sign took place on the night the Israelites left Egypt, the death of the firstborn in Egypt (Exodus 12). Traditionally, the 'ten plagues' include the nine mentioned above and the death of the firstborn, and the passage we have read today is generally regarded as a sign not a plague. However we define the plagues, the sign in today's reading contains many of the general features which accompany the details of each plague, and as such, it is usually regarded as an important introduction to the battle between God and Pharaoh which follows, leading up to the release of the Israelites from Egypt.

Going Deeper

As we go further in our study, we will look at the features of the story which make up a pattern for the plagues which follow, and then discover some interesting features of this particular sign which are not immediately obvious on a first reading. For example, when Aaron threw down his staff, it did not become the same kind of snake produced before when Moses performed the feat (4:3, 30)! Our translation uses the word 'serpent', and means something quite different! We must ask why God should change what happened in this way.

The pattern of the story, and control

There are five elements to this story which are to be found in the following ten plagues with varying degrees of emphasis, therefore providing a backbone to our understanding of the story of the plagues.

- Instruction from the Lord concerning what to do
- Moses and Aaron challenge Pharaoh to let the Israelite go
- Moses and Aaron perform a sign (a plague)
- The response of Pharaoh, either

- Pharaoh's magicians do the same
- Or Pharaoh asks Moses for release from the plague
- Or Pharaoh says he will release the Israelites

- Pharaoh hardens his heart and does not let the Israelites go

This whole structure is designed to show us that in the battle between God and Pharaoh, the Lord is in control. He initiates each contact at different times of the day and in different circumstances (as we will find out in later studies), progressively showing Pharaoh that his control of Egypt is not what he imagined. The whole story is about who is in control of events, with Pharaoh exercising the presumption of a king that he is in control of his kingdom.

In our passage today, we read that Pharaoh was initially in control and quite active. The Lord said to Moses in verse 9; 'when Pharaoh challenges you to perform a miracle', indicating that the Lord knew beforehand that Pharaoh would demand to see Moses and Aaron and require them to produce a sign. It is likely that Pharaoh wanted to show the two of them who was really in charge of Egypt! When Aaron performed the sign of the snake, he was ready and brought out magicians to counteract what they had done (the Hebrew of verse 11 clearly indicates Pharaoh's preparedness for confrontation). Later on in the first and second great plagues (8:7,18), the magicians appeared in the same way; but after that, they failed, leaving Pharaoh on his own to react to events. After that, God challenged his authority again and again with each new plague, and Pharaoh ended up with only one option, which was to listen to Moses and accept his demands or 'harden his heart'. He was not prepared to take the first course of action, but the second symbolised his inactivity and inability to do anything about what God was doing in his own land. For any absolute dictator, inactivity is loss of power, and Pharaoh's control gradually slipped away. His loss of power ultimately allowed God to take control and force the release of His people, an event which Scripture describes as the obtaining of glory 'over' Pharaoh by the Lord (14:4,17,18).

The 'plagues'?

It is worth noting at this early stage in the story of the plagues that the Hebrew word for 'plague', meaning some pandemic illness or threat to human survival, is only used once or twice in Exodus 7 to 11 (for example, in 8:2 and 11:1). Clearly each event was a serious threat to all Egypt and its people, but it is best to think of them all as further miraculous 'signs and wonders'. Over the years, people have debated whether these were all various forms of natural disasters which came on the people of that time, but although many of them are similar to natural disasters (such as the eighth plague of locusts), their appearance and disappearance as described in Scriptures is not normal. The fact that the magicians of the day were able to reproduce the first few signs with little difficulty shows that the people of the day knew the difference between what could be explained and what could not; but from the fourth sign onwards (9:11) the magicians were clueless as to what was going on. They withdrew in the face of superior power and control of nature.

The point is easily made that God's control of all things is greater than that of Pharaohs and kings, and despite our increased knowledge of the world around us, the same remains true for us today, however far we are tempted to take our explanations of these phenomena.

Snakes, magic, signs and wonders

One of the mysteries of this passage is the fact that when Aaron threw his staff on the ground, it did not produce a common snake (Hebrew 'nachash') described in the earlier parts of Exodus (4:3). This may have been a shock to Aaron and Moses as well as others around, but what was produced by this action was what I have called a 'serpent'. This comes from a different Hebrew word; 'tannin', which usually refers to magical or mythical monsters, sea dragons or as I have translated it, 'serpent'. Incidentally, both of these words are different from that used in Genesis 3 for 'serpent', which makes it unlikely that we should equate the creature produced from Aaron's staff as symbolic of Satan or the Devil!

It is no wonder therefore, that the magicians, when summoned by Pharaoh, were able to produce 'magical serpents', such acts were part of their performance repertoire, and ancient