

I went on YouTube this week and searched on “turn a stick into a snake magic trick” and sure enough, I found a video of a Chinese magician doing just exactly that. Apparently this is a classic magic trick that can be traced all the way back to ancient Egypt. But Moses did not know magic. His act is presented as a sign done directly by God which only then matched by Egyptian magicians. We are not being asked to believe in magic but in the power and the sovereignty of God.

Moses isn't here to play tricks or to traumatize us with snakes, he comes before Pharaoh to make a statement about power. The cobra was the symbol of the Egyptian high god. Pharaoh's crown consisted of a Cobra. It stood for his royal power and deity. When Moses' snake eats up the Egyptian snakes, it's a statement about power. Chapters 7-11 are a contest between the power of God and the power of Pharaoh, between the power of God and the powers of this world, between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of earth, between the authority of God and the rebellious human spirit. The contest can be seen most clearly in v 10, “So Moses and Aaron ... did just as the Lord commanded.” God displays his power when he has courageous and obedient partners. Pharaoh will do just the opposite. He will resist every invitation from God to practice justice to the powerless. He will do nothing that God asks him to do. As a friend of mine described a church that had gone off course, “They will believe anything so long as it is not in the Bible.” That's the spirit of Pharaoh. He's a guy who will believe anything so long as it doesn't come from the God of the Bible. So an escalating hardening comes upon Pharaoh. The more God acts for liberation, the greater will be Pharaoh's repression.

In Chapters 7-10 we have what Lemony Snicket would call “A Series of Unfortunate Events”—9 of them to be exact. These are the plagues that God brings upon Egypt. The first question someone new to the Bible will ask goes something like this: is this for real? There is no way to answer that question definitively but we can say this: each of these plagues is a natural phenomenon. A bloom of red algae in the Nile would certainly stain its waters like blood and result in a die off of fish and an exodus of frogs whose decaying flesh would produce volumes of gnats and flies. Biting flies would then transmit cattle disease and skin boils in humans. Finally, hail, locusts and sky-darkening sandstorms are regular natural disasters in both the modern and ancient worlds. God is using a miraculous sequence of natural events to announce his judgments against Egypt. The plagues also demonstrate an intimate knowledge of Egyptian religion for each one of these plagues represents the defeat of an Egyptian deity—from the Nile god Hapi to the sun god Ra. Each of these fake gods is unmasked, dethroned and defeated by the one true God of the oppressed immigrant community.

The 9 plagues very nicely group into 3 sets of 3. The first of each set begins with a warning at the Nile. The second of each set begins with a warning at the palace. The third of each set has no warning at all, God just acts. The sets escalate in severity. The first three are simply annoying: bad water, dead frogs and bugs. The second three are destructive: biting flies, dying cattle and skin boils. The third three bring death: lethal hailstones, wasting locusts and a paralyzing darkness. The purpose of each set of three is announced at the beginning of each group:

Set 1: (7:17) "By this you shall know that I am the LORD"

Set 2: (8:22) "that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth."

Set 3: (9:14) "that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth"

God's purpose is not narrowly limited to slave freedom. It is bigger, broader, wider and deeper. God's purpose is evangelical. He wants to win the nations to believe, love and obey him. Rabbi Paul sums up the story of the plagues nicely in his letter to the Romans: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them." (Romans 1:18-19)

We will see these plagues again in the book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament. There we read of another triple set of plagues this time coming in groups of seven: seven seals; seven trumpets and seven bowls. The numbers are different but the message is the same: God is using natural events to reveal judgment on behalf of his oppressed and enslaved people. His purpose in the book of Revelation is the same as in Exodus: God wants to bring the Pharaohs and Caesars of this world into a voluntary relationship of faithful obedience to him. If he wanted to destroy them all, there'd only be one plague. But the fact that there are so many in a series suggests God's desire is not to destroy but to redeem. John's gospel put it this way: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him." (Jn 3:17)

We learn some important things about Moses and Aaron during the plagues. They are daring and they are obedient. It is stated three times in chapter 7 alone that Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD commanded. That is the model for disciples: to hear and to do the word of God. Mary expressed it so well to the angel Gabriel in the gospel, "Let it be to me according to your word." The daring of Moses is to be seen in his risky confrontations with Pharaoh and with his own people. He has nothing to support himself with but words and promises supposedly from God. It is clear that God is powerful and he wants to take up the case of justice for the weak. It is also clear that God needs Moses and he will not work without Moses' obedience and daring. D.L. Moody once said, "Moses spent forty years in Pharaoh's

court thinking he was a somebody, 40 years in the desert learning he was in fact a nobody and 40 years showing what God can do with a somebody who found out he was a nobody.”

What we learn about Pharaoh is that he hardens. The more God acts for liberation the greater is Pharaoh’s repression. Plague by plague he becomes more isolated and self-deceived. By the fourth plague his political base admits Egypt is ruined but Pharaoh insanely refuses to acknowledge the new reality and clings ever more tightly to a lost cause. Like a drug addict he still believes he is in control of his world. How do you redeem people who defiantly cling to what is false? His whole world is coming apart. Everybody else can see it but Pharaoh can’t. Jesus struggled with this blindness of his opponents. He said, “The eye is the lamp of the body if your eye is healthy your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness how great is the darkness.” (Mt 6:22-23) The Apostle Paul was blind to the reality of Jesus Christ and fought against the gospel with everything he had. It is not a coincidence that God struck him literally blind until in the waters of baptism he regained his sight. It wasn’t just eyesight he got back but sanity.

The plague cycle in chapters 7-10 reveals three important truths about God.

God is our savior. He wants to deliver the weak and the oppressed. He wants to set things right in the world. He always uses his power on behalf of the abused. He saves people. This salvation is not just pie in the sky when you die but includes earthly justice and earthly freedom.

God is our judge. This is an idea that many modern people are pretty uncomfortable with. But for the oppressed and abused peoples of this world, judgement is a very welcome idea because it spells relief, deliverance and justice. Christians in Syria, North Korea and Egypt would love to have God’s judgment fall upon their nations because they are being abused. For most of the world’s population it is good and welcome news is that God is our judge. It is our common destiny that God will certainly set things right on this planet. You don’t want to be found in the way when his judgment comes.

God is a warrior. Moses sings it in Exodus 15:3, “The LORD is a warrior.” In the plagues God fights for the oppressed. In the plagues God does not hesitate to bring destruction down upon the arrogance of Egypt. In the plagues God does not hesitate to demonstrate his superiority over all other gods. Jesus is the embodiment of this divine warrior. Revelation 19 describes him sitting on a white horse with a stack of crowns on his head leading the armies of heaven, “with justice he judges and makes war.” (19:11) But the weapons of the divine warrior surprise us. His robe is dipped in blood—his own blood shed on the cross and the words of his mouth are like a sharp sword. He doesn’t need any other weapons because he has the power of an indestructible life. Be bold. Be brave. Be obedient and fight for justice alongside the divine warrior. He is our final judge. He is the only savior.