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A Futile imitatio Dei.

Kerygmatic Images of Contention in Exodus 7:8-13¹©

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Sermon series on Bible books face two challenges: how long will the series be, and which texts are candidates for such sermons. Base texts may be selected from the major narrative subunits of the book in question to illustrate the issue developed by that section. Exodus 1:1-15:21, the first major narrative sub-unit, moves from lament to praise in its depiction of the conflict between the Lord and Pharaoh. Admirable candidates from this narrative unit might be Pharaoh's first defiance, 5:1-6:1; the staff and snakes in Pharaoh's presence, 7:8-13; the devastation of the seventh plague, 9:13-35; the death of the firstborn, 12:29-36; or the narrative of the sea crossing, 14:1-31. Each of these texts would allow the congregation to hear a unique aspect of the conflict between Pharaoh and Israel's Lord and to be confronted by the central claim of the opening narrative. In this essay I will discuss Exodus 7:8-13 as the base text for the first in a series of six sermons on Exodus.

The Location of the Text and its Shape

Exodus 7:8-13 is a unified text. The previous pericope ends with a summarizing statement of Moses' and Aaron's obedience and a notation of their ages.² Since the plague reports themselves begin in Exodus 7:14, 7:8-13 forms the introduction to the plague series.³ The continuity of the magicians' role in the plagues supports this introductory function thematically.

Exodus 7:8-13 begins with the Lord instructing Moses and Aaron to do a "wonder" before Pharaoh. Like the first encounter with Pharaoh (5:1-6:1) it changes nothing—Pharaoh only hardens his heart "just as the Lord had said" (7:13, cf. 7:3, 4)—but it does heighten Pharaoh's unrepentant defiance. He who said, "Who is the Lord, I do not know him," (5:2), now issues his challenge with an *imitatio Dei* provided by his magicians. The encounter ends with Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to acknowledge the "wonder," and a reminder that the Lord had said he would react this way. The central actors in the drama are the Lord and Pharaoh, each supported by their servants; but only the Lord's servants are named, and only the Lord speaks. The key words "staff" (*mtš*, 9e, 10d, 12ac), "snake" (*tnyn*, 8g, 10e, 12b; not *nhš* as in 4:3-4), indicate important themes, as does the transformation of Aaron's staff.

The text is composed of five elements: an introduction (7:8), two parallel panels each composed of an instruction (summons), compliance, execution, and fulfillment (7:9-12b), the wonder (7:12c), and the conclusion (7:13).

8	And YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, saying:	Introduction	
9a	“When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying:	Instruction	A
9b	‘Give a wonder for yourselves!’		
9c	“Then say to Aaron:		
9d	‘Take your staff,		
9e	Cast [it] before Pharaoh,		
9f	Let it become a serpent.”		
10a	And Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh		
10b	and did so,		
10c	as YHWH commanded.		
10d	And Aaron cast his staff in the presence of Pharaoh		
	and his servants,		
10e	and it became a serpent.		
11a	Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers,	Summons (Instruction)	A ¹
11b	and they, too, the magicians of Egypt, did likewise with their arts.	Compliance	B ²
12a	Everyone of them cast their staffs		
12b	and they became serpents.		
12c	But Aaron’s staff swallowed their staffs.		
13a	Nevertheless, Pharaoh hardened his heart,	The conclusion	
13b	he did not listen to them,		
13c	just as YHWH had spoken.		

The first panel depicts the Lord’s speech-instruction to Moses and Aaron, their compliance and execution, and the fulfillment of the word God spoke to them. The second panel describes Pharaoh’s servants imitating these acts, achieving the transformation of their staffs by their magic arts.⁴ There is one major difference: where God instructs his servants with a speech, Pharaoh is depicted only as summoning his magicians. Pharaoh is speechless. The divine speech also provides the reader with unexpected challenges: the jussive *y^ehy* in 7:9, and the transformation of Aaron’s staff into a *tnyn*. A brief comment on each.

Unexpected challenges

Both the NIV and NRSV translate 9f: “and it will become a snake,” apparently reading a *wyhy* for the MT *y^ehy*, as do the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint. Houtman translates, “then it will become a snake.”⁵ Nehama Leibowitz translates “that it may become a dragon,” and Umberto Cassuto “that it may become a crocodile.”⁶ Although Cassuto does not comment on the verb, he places the phrase “and I decree now upon this rod:” before the translation, perhaps suggesting that the jussive plays a role. Propp, arguing that the more difficult text is preferable, translates, “Let it become a serpent,” as does Everett Fox.⁷

Reading *wyhy* for the MT jussive would create a normal verbal sequence. Nevertheless, the more difficult MT reading may evoke the well-known sequence “let it be . . . and it was so” of Genesis 1, as Benno Jacob suggests.⁸ Even though the jussive clause is awkwardly juxtaposed to the verbal sequence in v. 9, in 10e the narrative declares, “and it became (*wyhy*) a serpent.” This *wyqtl* verb would be expected in a command-completion sequence which begins with a jussive.⁹ The unexpected jussive contributes to a general air of the unexpected in a sequence redolent of theomachy. John D. Currid argues that Moses and Aaron were using esteemed Egyptian practices to humiliate Pharaoh, especially the throwing down of the staffs, a well-understood

“challenge to the power of Egyptian magic,” especially the transformation of the staff into a serpent “because it (the *uraeus* serpent crown) was his very emblem.”¹⁰ He writes:

The Egyptians described Pharaoh’s character as eternal, worthy of worship, omniscient, and the one who imbued Egypt with existence and power. They taught that he was *ka*, the life force and soul of Egypt. They also believed he was its creator. And, again, the symbol of that deification and majesty was the serpent-crested coronet. When Moses had Aaron fling the rod/snake before Pharaoh, he was directly assaulting that token of Pharaonic sovereignty—it was a scene of polemical taunting. At the point that Aaron’s rod swallowed the staffs of the Egyptian magicians the affair became an outright denouncement and rejection of Pharaonic deity and omnipotence. Pharaoh’s cobra-crested diadem had no power against Yahweh. Its magic was wanting and weak. Its protection was absent in the face of the reproach of the Hebraic God. Clearly Yahweh alone was in control of that entire episode.¹¹

In this contest between the Creator and a pretender to the position the unexpected jussive sequence stands out and evokes the well-known jussive-imperfect sequence of Genesis 1. Even more so when Pharaoh’s servants must resort to the occult sciences;¹² this is obviously not an equal battle. There is no Egyptian “word” that can counter the Creator’s word. Thus the reader discerns that the God who instructs Moses and Aaron is the same God who spoke creation into being. That this God places the jussive in the mouth of one who is like God to Pharaoh (Ex. 7:1) only reinforces this connection. Pharaoh’s *imitatio Dei* by proxy only humiliates him. Only Israel’s God and his unique messenger speaks as Creator such that “it is so”; Pharaoh is mute, consigned to watching the unexpected swallowing of his magicians’ staffs. Is it possible that the Midrash, cited by Leibowitz,¹³ has this in mind when it has God saying he will undo the order within which he placed Pharaoh?¹⁴

The use of *tnyn* in 7:8-13 is unexpected also because Exodus 4:2-4 depicts the transformation of Moses’ staff into a snake (*nhš*). Nevertheless, in the context of a cosmic battle, *tnyn* is to be expected. Various translations as “serpent,” “dragon,” and “sea-monster,” and used in parallel with “Rahab,” and “the Deep,”¹⁵ *tnyn* is not a garden variety snake. To the contrary, it evokes the threat of chaos. Aaron’s staff (*mth*) turned into a *tnyn*, the staffs of the Egyptians that are also transformed into *tnynym*, and the swallowing of the Egyptians’ staffs by Aaron’s staff, together introduce three images of contention.

Images of contention

God effects his power and will through the staff in his servant’s hands. When Moses stretches out his hand with the staff it is equal to God’s “stretching out his right hand” (7:5; 14:16).¹⁶ By metonymy the staff stands for God’s royal rule and power, as exercised by his loyal servants, over Egypt, the nations and his people. This comports with its meaning in the ancient Near East where it was recognized as a sign of royal authority in many cultures.¹⁷ The staff linked the ruler’s authority to the divine, and so to that which gives life. Several aspects of the meaning of “staff” are illustrated by four divine figures painted in the tomb of Seti I. Each holds a staff and is accompanied by an inscription. In ascending order, the first figure holding a tree of life, is called the lord of the creative word; the second, a royal figure, holds a shepherd’s staff; the third figure carries the *was* staff emblematic of life and health; and the fourth holds a simple staff. According to the

accompanying inscription these four beings provide the land of Sokaris (the realm of the dead) an abundance of life-giving substances.¹⁸ This suggests that the *mt* in Exodus 7:8-13 is also emblematic of the royal authority represented by the emissaries of the Lord and Pharaoh.¹⁹

Scripture considers the *tnyn* to be a mere creature (Gen. 1:21; Ps. 148:7), albeit powerful. But, like the sea, it remains subordinate to divine authority; it cannot overreach its boundaries without permission (Ps. 74:13; Is. 27:1). The ancient Near East, however, understood the *tnyn* to be a terrifying dragon-monster that constantly threatened to swallow the good order of society.²⁰ Both elements, the threat of water and of being swallowed, appear in significant locations in Exodus. Pharaoh's order to throw the boy babies into the Nile evokes the threat of Sea (*yam*), even though this word does not appear there. Moses' salvation from the waters of death by means of a ark (*tebah*, Ex. 2:3; cf. Gen. 6:16, 17), clearly recalls the great flood that swallowed the ancient world (Gen. 6:9-8) at the Lord's command. Ironically, although Pharaoh commands the drowning of new-born Israelite males, the only ones who are depicted as drowning are the Egyptians (15:4, 8, 10, 19, 21). We read: "You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them." (15:12). Nicholas J. Tromp argues that "earth" in 15:12 refers to the underworld, the chaotic part of the world. He writes:

On a divine command the "earth" opens its mouth and devours the Egyptians. To all appearances, the enemy vanishes into the sea, is swallowed by the waves; these billows, however, acquire extraordinary dimensions and become "mighty waters" (15,10 and *infra*). In the hymnic description this is the end of the Egyptians; they were covered by the sea, the waters of chaos, i.e. they were swallowed by the netherworld: they are in the land of no return.²¹

Although the flooding of the Nile waters was understood as beneficial, Egypt was familiar with the threat of Chaos. There, writes Keel,

the evening darkness is above all the domain of the monstrous serpent Apophis (who) . . . is the embodiment of the dark sea, the evening clouds, and the morning haze—in a word, those forces which can endanger the sun at its setting in the evening and on its rising in the morning.²²

The Canaanite myths, familiar and often attractive to Israel, understood the yearly cycle of nature as a conflict between order and disorder. Extant icons represent Baal wielding a staff-like object, a cedar tree or a tree of lightning, a staff he received after his enthronement. Following his enthronement Baal opens a window, his holy voice issues forth, and he

brandishes his lightning in tree form as a weapon against his foe on earth, namely Mot. The action which symbolizes the fruition of his powers as king and as mediator of fertility, the opening of a window in his newly built palace, ironically also creates a 'breach' that permits his adversaries once again to threaten his domain and kingship, setting the stage for his confrontation with his second and most persistent challenger, Mot. An epic combat begins between Baal, God of fertility, and thus of life, and Mot, or death, following the completion of Baal's palace and reoccurs 'seven years' later. In the initial conflict Baal and the order he symbolizes succumb to Mot and the forces of chaos. Baal descends to Mot's

netherworld abode and rain disappears from the earth. In the end, however, Baal triumphs over Mot and fertility and the cosmic order are restored.²³

This myth was regularly celebrated and reenacted in great cultic festivals in order to assure good order and fertility in the fields and society. In these festivals the king also played a crucial role.

These images of contention depict the nature of the conflict between the Lord and Pharaoh, and foreshadow its outcome at the Sea. The staffs are emblematic of the authority and life-giving power of the royal contenders, the transformation of Aaron's staff into a *tnyn* in the context of a jussive evocative of the creation account suggests that Israel's God is more powerful than the feared chaos monster because it is a mere creature, it has none of the power or status ancient Near Eastern thought attributed to it. The creation of the *tnyn* also links up with the serpent imagery associated with the divinity and power of Pharaoh.²⁴ By their transformation of the staffs into *tnynym* Pharaoh's servants mean to declare his divine status. Pharaoh's power appears to be equal to that of the Lord. From the mythological point of view, Egyptian or Ugaritic, one expects a fight to the death between the *tnynym*.²⁵

The text unexpectedly subordinates serpent symbolism to that of the Lord's staff/scepter, without describing a reverse transformation,²⁶ because we read that Aaron's staff swallows the Egyptians' staffs, not the divinely created serpent the serpents of Egypt. If the above interpretations are correct, this suggests that although the serpent may symbolize Egyptian power and authority, as well as the threat of chaos, in biblical thought the *tnyn* is a mere creature. And a mere creature cannot represent such rule and power, only the *mt*. On earth only the true Creator has the authority and power to swallow the Great King of Egypt. This scene, then, depicts nothing less than a "struggle between adversaries for control of an apparently organized world."²⁷ Pharaoh struggles to maintain the order of the old world. But the order of things constructed by a humanity expelled from God's presence, the ancient order subversive of the good order brought into being by Israel's God at the very beginning, has now been served notice: its days are numbered.

In this second encounter with proud Pharaoh, the Lord provides the wonder (*mwpt*) of swallowing, a sign that the kingdom of this world will not long survive. He who would destroy the coming of the kingdom through the seed of Abraham (Ex. 1:7, 8-14; 2:23-25; Gen. 12:7; 46:6, 7; 48:4) is but a mute witness to the proleptic destruction of his own kingship. Rather than yield, he hardens his heart in defiance.²⁸

Images of contention in their canonical context

The verb "to swallow" (*bl*[□]) in Exodus 7:12 concentrates the images of contention into one narrative icon. Its repetition in Exodus 15:12 ("You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them.") also reinforces reading this text as the introduction to the plagues narrative.²⁹ Placing Pharaoh's defeat before the plagues introduces an eschatological element that shapes the reading of the narrative. In the light of the adversary's proleptic defeat the audience now hears the account of the plagues from the perspective of Pharaoh's powerlessness and God's overwhelming might. This already-but-not-yet moment should not, however, lead the audience to underestimate Pharaoh's stubborn intent to undermine the future of Abraham's seed. While he retains power God's people continue in misery and the knowledge of God will be disputed among the nations,

and even in Israel. Reading the plagues in this manner creates the kind of realism that the Church today also experiences: Christ is victorious, but it must remain watchful (cf. 1 Peter 5:8).

Although Pharaoh disappears after the Song of the Sea, the biblical narrative is not yet finished with the tension between God and his ancient adversary, of whom Pharaoh is merely one historical manifestation. The nations tremble at the coming of the Lord as he leads his people to the promised land (Ex. 15:14-16), and the adversary sows obstacles on the way. Only Moses' stretched out hands defeats Amalek's attempt to wipe out the promised seed (Ex. 17:8-16). This account ends with the Lord's declaration that he will war against Amalek for generations to come (Ex. 17:16). Later, where Pharaoh and Amalek failed, Balak of Moab seeks success.

Balak of Moab, Pharaoh *redivivus*, "terrified because there were so many people" (Num. 22:3; cf. Ex. 1:10), summons Balaam to do the dirty deed. He instructs him:

A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed. (Num. 22:5b-6)

The phrase "they are too powerful for me" recalls Exodus 1:10; "those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed," Genesis 12:2.³⁰ Balak wants to cripple Israel, but God renders Balaam's sorcery useless (Num. 23:8, 20, 26): he can only bless Israel (Num. 24:9, 10); Israel will grow strong and her desert enemy Amalek will be destroyed (Num. 24:18, 20; Esther 9). Nothing is said about the consequences Balak suffered for this attempt at subversion, but Balaam does utter this oracle: "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab . . ." (24:17).

When this "scepter" appears Herod attacks, forcing Jesus' escape to Egypt. But Herod's sword "swallows" many boys under two years of age in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16; cf. Ex. 1:16, 22). After Herod dies the child-king, like his ancestors, returns from Egypt. Jesus' ministry creates opposition among Israel's leadership. When he tells them they are not of the promised seed but of the great adversary of Israel (John 8:44) they seek his death. Like Pharaoh before them, they pretend equality and manipulate his death sentence. But death holds the Christ only for a little while; the great swallower cannot contain this descendant of Abraham. Like the sea event, the cross publicly embarrasses the adversary (Col. 2:15). Thus Paul can also write the church at Corinth

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "*Death has been swallowed up in victory.*" "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord

Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:51-58)

Like the swallowing of Pharaoh's staffs, Christ's death and resurrection signals the end of the great adversary. Yet, Paul's admonition to the Church to stand firm and to let nothing move it indicates that the conflict is not yet over. Although his time is limited, the adversary still possesses the power and permission to do tremendous harm (Mark 5:11-13). And so the Church of Christ continues under the persecution of the dragon-monster who would introduce the floods of chaos into the Church itself. He moves to and fro upon the earth, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8), with only apparent success.

After Jesus' resurrection the Church experiences enormous growth under the blessing of the Holy Spirit (Acts 3:41, 47; 4:4). Opposition grows and containment policies are formulated by the Sanhedrin (4:17) and the royal court (12:1); but the more they persecute the believers, the more they grow (5:14; 6:1; 9:31; 11:21, cf. Ex. 1:12). Herod is foolish enough to persecute the Church just before the Passover by killing James with the sword and imprisoning Peter (Acts 12:1-4), but Peter escapes. And Herod, praised as if a god, is struck down by the angel of death, like Egypt. But the church continues to grow (12:21-24).

The Apocalypse of John receives this history in a great vision (Rev. 12). He sees the dragon trying to devour the male child as soon as it is born; but it is snatched away to safety in the desert. The dragon, having been hurled to the earth after losing a battle with Michael the archangel, pursues the woman who has given birth to the promised seed and seeks to sweep her away in a flood. But the earth saves the woman by swallowing the great river. Then the dragon, enraged at the woman, "went off to make war against the rest of her offspring--those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17).

Unlike Pharaoh, however, the dragon still stands on the seashore (Rev. 13:1, cf. Ex. 14:31) and will be given a time of immense power, but he, death and Hades will be devoured by a lake of fire (Rev. 20:10, 14). Then the sea will be no more (Rev. 21:1) and the Church will hear a voice from the throne of God: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4).

For the New Testament Church the death and resurrection of Christ are the theological equivalent of the event depicted in Exodus 7:8-13: the war is over, the opponent has been swallowed, but many battles remain. It is yet a long way to the promised land and there are many obstacles, external and internal.

The most insidious opponent

Those who oppose God's redemptive-historical project through Jesus Christ are, in some sense, historical manifestations of the adversary of Genesis 3. From the outside they attack and make difficult the way of Abraham and his descendants. In one way or another they seek to swallow Israel and make her disappear from the earth. Such are Egypt and Amalek, Og and Sihon, the Midianites and the Philistines, Sennacherib and

Nebuchadnezzar. Ultimately, however, it is Israel's rebellion against God that leads to her being swallowed up among the nations. The greatest historical enemy God's people faces is herself.

Complaints about water and food at Massah and Meribah (Ex. 17:1-7; Num. 21:1-13) turns into full-blown opposition when Israel constructs the golden calf. Only Moses's mediation saves Israel from God's full wrath. Now she, like Pharaoh and Egypt before her, suffers the Lord's blows (Ex. 32:35; cf. 7:27; 12:23², 12:27) because she is stubborn like Pharaoh (Ex. 32:9; 33:3, 5). Although miraculously born of Sarah, Israel cannot yet escape the sinful inheritance received from Adam and Eve. After leaving Sinai, Israel brought on herself the curses of Balak by worshiping the fertility god Baal of Peor and indulging in sexual immorality with Moabite women (Num. 25:1-3; 31:15, 16; cf. Ex. 32:1-6). As at Mt. Sinai, so here divine anger executes Israel's leaders and a plague takes 24,000 lives (25:4-5, 9; cf. Ex. 32:27-29, 35). God protects the 603,550 of Israel, plus women and children (1:46; 2:32), against Balak, but when Israel herself stands in the way of the promised seed God rises up against his own people.³¹

On the Plains of Moab Moses reminds Israel of the threat of the external enemies, but then shifts to Israel's responsibility to maintain the Sinai instruction so that the ancient promises might be fulfilled through them (Deut. 7; 11). By now it has become clear that hidden in the depths of her soul is Israel's desire to be like the nations, to be stubborn like Pharaoh. This becomes a major problem in the land of promise.

Soon after Joshua's death the people serve the local gods (Judges 2:11-13). So begins the ebb and flow of Israel's loyalty which comes to an end with the exile when the Lord allows Israel to be swallowed up among the nations (Hos. 8:8; Lam. 2:2, 5, 16; cf. Hab. 1:13; 2 Kings 17). And, although the nations are instruments of punishment, God does not grant them ultimate success; they too will suffer Pharaoh's fate:

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon shall be devoured "because like a serpent (*tnyn*) he has swallowed (*bl*[□]) us" (Jer. 51:34); Ezekiel describes Pharaoh as the "great monster (*tnyn*) lying among the streams" (Ezek. 29:3) who will be hooked like a fish and left in the desert as food for the birds and beasts. But disorder will not rule. Isaiah's vision of a devastated earth ends with a vision of Mount Zion: "On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up (*bl*[□]) death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken." (Ezek. 25:8)

The pretenders do not have the last word. The nations' opposition and Israel's rebellion may interrupt the journey, but its final goal will not be denied. Exodus 7:8-13 reminds God's people in the promised land, under constant pressure to honor Baal as lord of fertility, that the Lord's power over Yam and Mot is final, that Baal has as much power to give life as did Pharaoh on shores of Sea (Ex. 14:30; cf. 1 Kings 18:26-29). For the exiled community, reeking of the swallower's bile and burdened by God's heavy hand (Lam. 2:2, 5), barren and useless among the nations (Hos. 8:7-8), this text urges a lament and confession (Lam. 3:40-42). And when in exile, the adversary Haman, a distant relative of the Amalekites, plots the destruction of the Jews, he is thwarted by the shrewd wisdom of Mordecai and Esther.

Centuries of giving in to the adversary's seductions and hiding God's glory among the nations, of rejecting the words of the prophets (2 Kings 17), of the failure of even her best kings to overcome the wickedness among them (2 Kings 23:25-26), remind the

returned exiles they have not the strength of purpose nor the courage of its convictions (Neh. 9:32-37). Thus Ezra challenges them to break off their marriages with foreign women, for they “have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness” (Ezra 9:2). Amidst these difficulties Zechariah reminds them of God’s purpose: Jerusalem will again be the center of all the nations (Zech. 8-14), the nations who sought to swallow Israel would suffer terrible plagues, they and their animals, especially if they do not go up to Jerusalem to acknowledge the Lord (Zech. 14:12-19). Under Ezra and Nehemiah the community rededicates itself (Ezra 8; Neh. 9-10). But broken vows soon become Israel’s daily bread, again (Neh. 10:28-39; 13). In the end, only the great son of Abraham and David can fix the problem of the exile (Matt. 1:12-16, 23). He has overcome the adversary (1 Cor. 15:51-58).

From canon to commentary: selections from the history of interpretation

Scripture’s christological reading is echoed in various ways by the early church. In his message on the plagues of Egypt Origen links the transformed staff to the cross:

The significance of the fact that the rod, having been cast forth, becomes a dragon or serpent, and devours the serpents of the Egyptian magicians who “had done likewise,” is indicated in the statement in the Gospel which shows that the serpent represents wisdom or prudence: “be wise as serpents,” Scripture says; and elsewhere, “The serpent was wiser than all animals and beasts which were in paradise.” Therefore, the cross of Christ whose preaching appeared as “foolishness,” this cross . . . after it was cast forth in the earth, that is once it came to be believed in by men, was changed into wisdom and such a great wisdom that it devoured all the wisdom of the Egyptians, that is of this world.³²

We also find this kind of exegesis elsewhere. According to Martine Dulaey, Ambrose’s reflection on the rod-serpent includes the staff as a symbol of Christ, the devouring of the staffs as pointing to Christ’s victory over heresies, even his kenosis and resurrection: “thus, the serpent thrown to the ground symbolizes Christ’s dwelling among men and women, his kenosis, his passion, his burial. The serpent’s becoming a staff again, . . . evokes Christ’s resurrection and his divine nature.”³³ Augustine, according to Dulaey, takes the interpretation further. The rod-serpent prefigures the restoration of humanity and develops an ecclesial meaning: “The serpent of Moses was the body of Christ, the serpents of the magicians, by counterblow, a figure of the spiritually dead, the unbelievers; the serpent Christ ‘eats’ them, that is, he assimilates them, and thus, in him, they become the staff, that is, they rise from the dead. Incorporation in the Church through faith is the condition for the resurrection of all.”³⁴ The rod-serpent also points to the fall, and the rods-serpent of the magicians refer to impious peoples. Under Augustin’s influence, Dulaey writes, this biblical episode becomes “a parable of the fall of humanity and of its restoration to becoming the children of God.”³⁵

Calvin argues that the goal of the transformation of the staff was “that the mean and rustic guise of Moses should not be despised.” Thus Moses’ authority receives the emphasis. The transformation of the Egyptians’ staffs in “an almost equal contest” receives divine efficacy so that the Egyptians “would not guard themselves from manifest

destruction.” He ends his comments with a critique of the papists who argue that “the serpent is called the rod of Moses, as the bread substantiated into the body of Christ retains the name of bread.” Calvin replies: “the bread is called the body of Christ although it remains bread, just as the serpent which then appeared is called the rod.”³⁶

Like Calvin, Henry Ainsworth spends considerable time discussing the problem of magic and the nature of the miracle. Discussing the magicians in the light of Jannes and Jambres (2 Tim. 3:8), as types of seducers of the truth, he suggests that Moses and Aaron’s overcoming them is like overcoming the Antichrist.³⁷ Matthew Henry’s comments move in the same vein. God uses the magicians to frighten Pharaoh into compliance, but “to the seed of the serpent these serpents were no amazement.” God, he says, “suffers the lying spirit to do strange things, that the faith of some may be tried and manifested (Deut. xiii. 3; 1 Cor. xi. 19), that infidelity of others may be confirmed, and that he who is filthy may be filthy still, 2 Cor. iv.4.”³⁸ C. F. Keil takes the transformation as an opportunity to show Pharaoh that Moses was God (Exod. 7:1) and that “in the defeat of their enchantments by Moses the gods of Egypt were overcome by Jehovah (chap. xii. 12) . . . in the very first miraculous sign.”³⁹

These soteriological, ecclesiological, eschatological, and even anthropological, interpretations emerge from the text’s description of the transformation and swallowing of the staffs. These ironic images of contention provide the twenty-first century church the opportunity to reflect on the adversarial powers that seek to swallow it, to erase it, to handicap it, to prevent its participation in the discourse that shapes life on this earth. One such power is Islam, in traditionally Islamic countries it opposes Christianity forcefully; elsewhere it seeks to regain “lost” territory (e.g., Andaluz, a.k.a. Spain).⁴⁰ In its sermons on this text let the church identify its opponents so that the faithful know the shape of the journey that lies ahead.⁴¹ Let it also make clear that this text is not about a second chance for Pharaoh and his ilk, but about their defeat by the alien and irresistible power of the gospel, a gospel that will survive all attempts to erase it, even while the faithful suffer the blows of the ancient adversary.

In spite of these blows, let the Church of Jesus Christ “stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (1 Cor. 15:58)

1. This the essay, slightly revised, was first published in *Genius Loci. In Honour of Frank Sawyer* (Sarospatak, Hungary, 2006), 233-251.

2. So also Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Westminster John Knox, 1991), 96; Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus. A Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 118; Jacques Cazeaux, “Naître en Égypte: Exode 1-7,7 - Étude Littéraire,” *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 60 (1980): 403. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 88, suggests that 6:28-7:7 sums up the narrative beginning at 5:1, and that 7:8-13 introduces the plagues sequence, as does Juan Guillén Torralba, *Exodo. Texto y Comentario* (MAT; Sigueme, 1992), 58. Not so Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman, 1969), 130-142, who takes it as ending the unit beginning with 6:2, and C. Houtman, *Exodus. Vertaald en Verklaard* (COT; Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1986), 463-466, who argues that 7:8-13 concludes 5:22-7:13 thereby suggesting that the Lord gives Pharaoh a second chance before the onslaught of the plagues.

3. So also Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 151; Fretheim, *Exodus*, 113; Durham, *Exodus*, 91; Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 94 (a credentialing scene); and John D. Currid, “The Egyptian Setting of the ‘Serpent.’ Confrontation in Exodus 7,8-13,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 39.2 (1995): 205. This essay is substantially republished in John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1997), 83-103. The

extent of the plagues narrative varies with commentators: Dennis J. McCarthy, "Moses' Dealings with Pharaoh: Ex 7,8-10,27" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27.4 (1965): 336-347; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 287-310, reads from 7:8 through 11:10.

4. For further instructive discussions see, Houtman, *Exodus*, 498-504; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 147-150.

5. Houtman (*Exodus*, 457), cites GKC 109h. But these cases discuss conditional sentences. He also refers to Joüon 116i, who, however, cites Ex 7:9 as a questionable case. *The New Bible in Dutch* (Haarlem: Nederlandsbijbelgenootschap, 2004) translates "die staf zal dan een grote slang worden."

6. Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1983), 164; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 94.

7. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 293; Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 286.

8. So Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible. Exodus* (trans. with introd. Walter Jacob; Hoboken, NJ.: KTAV, 1992), 216: "The transformation of the staff into a serpent was a minor creative act of God which the *har-tu-mim* then imitated; God began the Egyptian drama playfully."

9. See the discussion of this sequence in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11. A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 84. This structure is typical of P to which Ex. 7:8-13 belongs, Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 131; and see, John Van Seters, "A Contest of Magicians? The Plague Stories in P," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells. Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, eds. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 569-580, who takes 7:1-7 as the introduction to the plagues narrative.

10. Currid, "The Egyptian Setting," 213-214.

11. Currid, "The Egyptian Setting," 214.

12. Thomas C. Römer, "Competing Magicians in Exodus 7-9: Interpreting Magic in the Priestly Theology," in *Magic in the Biblical World. From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon* (ed. Todd E. Klutz; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 20; and, Ph. Guillaume, "Metamorphosis of a Ferocious Pharaoh," *Biblica* 85 (2004): 232-236.

13. Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, 164: "You likewise, I created you you . . . and you boasted . . . 'My river is mine own and I have made it for myself.' Behold I shall turn you back to nothingness and chaos. You swallowed up all the staffs of the tribes of the children of Israel, behold I shall cause you to disgorge all you have swallowed."

14. What God begins with the creation of a *tbyn*, ends with a world upside down, Egypt is a *tohu-wabohu* at the end of the plagues. So Fretheim, *Exodus*, 106, 129-130; and Ziony Zevit, "The Priestly Redaction and Interpretation of the Plague Narrative in Exodus," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 66 (1976): 210.

15. BDB, 1072. Cassuto (*Exodus*, 94) translates "crocodile" because it is "more in keeping with the environment." But the cobra and other species of serpents were common in Egypt, indeed, "the venomous snake was truly the symbol or emblem of Egypt." So Currid, "The Egyptian Setting," 207-208.

16. The locution "the staff of God" occurs twice in Exodus (4:20; 17:9).

17. William C. Hayes, *The Scepter of Egypt. A Background for the Study of the Egyptian Antiquities in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1953), 284-287, who distinguishes among six

different kinds of Egyptian staffs and scepters; O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World. Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of the Psalms* (trans. Timothy J. Hallett; New York: Seabury, 1978), 52 and 213-215 (figs. 291-293); L. E. Toombs, "Scepter," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4 (ed. George Arthur Buttrick, et. al.; New York: Abingdon, 1962), 234-235. See also Jennifer A. Amy-Dressler, "Moses and the Rod," *PEGLMBS* 6 (1986): 18-31.

18.

Brede Kristensen, *Symbool en Werkelijkheid. Een Bundel Godsdienshistorische Studien* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1954), 228-229; and see Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* 3, 167-168; 213-215 (figs. 229, 230, 291-293), for iconographic depictions of various staffs.

19.H. Simian-Yofre, "mth," *TDOT* 8, 243.

20. For brief discussions on the dragon monster see, Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World.*, 47-56, and Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), 62, 126. On the significance of "swallowing" an opponent and the symbols of a staff and tree of life, see Elizabeth Williams-Forte, "The Snake and the Tree in the Iconography and Texts of Syria During the Bronze Age," in *Ancient Seals and the Bible* (eds. Leonard Gorelick and Elizabeth Williams-Forte; Malibu: Undena Publications, 1983), 37; Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 212-214; Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 126-127; and W. G. Lambert, "Trees, Snakes and Gods in Ancient Syria and Anatolia," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48 (1985): 435-457.

21. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, 25-26. See also Num. 16:18-23 which depicts the earth swallowing Korah and his men. Severino Croatto's *Liberación y libertad. Pautas hermenéuticas* (Buenos Aires: Mundo Nuevo, 1973), depicts on its front cover an ancient dragon and, "the god Xolotl (of the Nahuatl religion) who emerges at dawn along with the emblems of victory over darkness. A symbol of our America which announces in the midst of the struggles its own liberation." Quote taken from the reverse of the title page.

22. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 54 (and see fig. 55).

23. Williams-Forte, "The Snake and the Bible," 36. Baal's first opponent was Yam, the Sea.

24. Currid, "The Egyptian Setting," 208-212.

25. Interpreters such Origen have read the conflict thus. See below, fn. 29.

26. The subject of speculation in the early church. See below.

27. Dennis J. McCarthy, "'Creation' Motifs in Ancient Hebrew Poetry," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (1967): 393.

28. Currid ("The Egyptian Setting," 216-224) suggests that "hardening" should be read against the Egyptian custom of weighing the heart as a condition for entering he afterlife. But neither 7:4 nor 7:13 use the verb *kbd*.

29. Houtman, *Exodus I*, 464, argues that 7:8-13 concludes 5:22-7:13 thereby suggesting that the Lord gives Pharaoh a second chance before the onslaught of the plagues.: "JHWH geeft Pharaoh nog een tweede kans. JHWH heeft geduld met Farao en biedt hem alsnog de mogelijkheid in te gaan op de door Mozes en Aäron overgebrachte eis om het volk te laten gaan." This reading of the second encounter fundamentally alters the hermeneutic function of this text: grace towards, not judgment of Pharaoh, receives the emphasis. But divine patience with Pharaoh seems out of place in a text that heightens and highlights Pharaoh's stubbornness, and the divine intervention that brings him to his end.

30. For other significant parallels between Exodus and Numbers see, Erich Zenger, et. al., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1995), 37.

31. Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their followers were swallowed up in the earth (Num. 16:28-35) for opposing the Lord; fire consumed the 250 who were offering incense (cf. Num. 11:1; Lev. 10:2). Later on Moses exhorts the second generation not to imitate the sin of the first (Num. 32:14-15).

32. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (The Fathers of the Church; trans. Ronald E. Heine; Washington: Catholic University of America, 1982), 267-268. Origen also writes: “the *snake* which had been made from Aaron’s rod *devoured* the snakes of the Egyptians” (p. 260, emphasis added).

33. Martine Dulaey, “Le bâton transformé en serpent. L’exégèse augustinienne d’Ex 4,2-4 et Ex 7, 8-12,” in *Collectanea augustiniانا: mélanges J. J. Van Bavel*, by Tarsicius J. Van Bavel, B. Bruning, M. Lambregtse, J. Van Houtem (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 726.

34. Dulaey, “Le bâton transformé,” 730-731. The ecclesial interpretation, Dulaey argues (p. 736), slowly “swallowed” all the details of Exod. 7:8-13.

35. Dulaey, “Le bâton transformé,” 737.

36. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 2 (trans. C. W. Bingham; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 114, 149-150.

37. Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations on the Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (first published 1612; further editions: 1627 and 1639; reprint 1843, Blackie & Sons, Edinburgh; reprint Ligonier, PA.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1991), 270-271.

38. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1, *Genesis to Joshua* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), comm. Exod. 7:8-13 (no pagination).

39. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, *The Pentateuch* (trans. James Martin; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 476-477.

40. See Jan A. B. Jongeneel, “Church Building in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia: A Case Study of Islamic Power Politics,” in *For God So Loved the World. Missiological Reflections in Honor of Roger S. Greenway* (ed. Arie C. Leder; Belleville, ON.: Essence, 2006), 51-69. See also Paul Marshall, ed., *Radical Islam’s Rules: The Worldwide Spread of Extreme Shari’a Law* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). In March 2006 the Islamic Council of Spain asked the Vatican for permission to pray in the cathedral-mosque of Córdoba, Spain. Built in the 8th century on the site of a Visigoth basilica, the mosque continues to be considered the most important Islamic monument in the western world. After the expulsion of Islam the mosque was transformed into a place of Christian worship. Imagine Christians asking permission to pray in the Hagia Sophia, formerly a Christian basilica.

41. A recent sermon on this text (Jeong Woo Lee, “A Paradigm for the Exodus Conflict,” *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical-Theological Preaching* 12.1 [1997]: 33-40.) is exegetically successful, but fails to aid the faithful in identifying the contemporary manifestations of the ancient enemy.