

## Chapter Seven

### (The Staff to Serpent Miracle and the First Plague)

Moses and Aaron stood before the Pharaoh on a mission from God. His message: release My people. The pharaoh's response: ***"Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice...? I know not the Lord..." (5:2).*** He wasn't denying that the Lord was "a" god...but he certainly didn't recognize Him as THE God. The Egyptians had one of the largest and most complex group of gods of any ancient civilization – some historians estimating that they numbered in the hundreds. Most were associated with the sun, the moon, the animal kingdom, the underworld, etc. If you studied Egyptian history, you would notice that their gods changed over time – they rose and fell in importance – as Egyptian society evolved.

There were eleven they worshiped frequently – perhaps even daily. Here is a "snapshot" of five of the more important Egyptian deities. You may recognize a few of the names.



**OSIRUS** was one of Egypt's most important gods. He was the god of the afterlife, and by extension, the underworld. The Egyptians believed some of their Pharaohs resurrected, Osirus being the first of those. It was also believed he controlled the Nile River's cycle of flooding, which the agricultural needs of Egypt depended on. Osirus is said to have fathered **Horus** with the goddess **Isis** (Osirus' sister). He is pictured as a strong warrior with the head of a Jackal. On his staff is the head of a cobra.

**ISIS** was the daughter of **GEB**, the god of the Earth, and **NUT**, the goddess of the sky. She was **Osirus'** sister and also the mother of **Horus**. Initially an obscure goddess, she became one of the most important deities of ancient Egypt, her cult eventually spreading throughout the Roman Empire until she was worshipped from England to Afghanistan. She is, in fact, still revered by pagans today as a "Magical Healer," capable of curing the sick and even



bringing the deceased back to life. She was viewed as a role model for women.



**HORUS** – (also known as Heru or Hor) served many functions. Most notably he was the god of the sky, but also the god of kingship. The son of Osiris and Isis, he had a human body with the head of a falcon. His right eye is said to be the Sun, or the morning star and his left eye the Moon, or evening star. He represented Power, and was closely associated the the Sun god, **Re**. Some even believed the reigning king of Egypt was a manifestation of **Horus**. From the First Dynasty onward, Horus and the god Seth were thought to be perpetual antagonists, finally reconciling when both Upper and Lower Egypt became one nation.



**BASTET** – sometimes called **BAST**, was an ancient Egypt goddess with the lower body of a serpent, the upper body of a woman, and the head of a lioness. Later, when cats became domesticated, her head was depicted as such. Eventually, she was envisioned in heer entirety as a cat. She was the daughter of **Re** the Sun god.

**ANUBIS** – (drawing at right) also called **ANPU**, was represented as either a Jackal or as a man with the head of a jackal. He was considered the god of the dead! His particular concern was with the funerary care of the dead, hence he was reputed to be the inventor of embalming – an art he was supposed to have first employed on the corpse of **OSIRIS**. Later he was also considered to be the “conductor of souls” and was sometimes identified by the Greco-Roman world as **HERMES**.



So... When Pharaoh Ahmose said, “*I know not the Lord,*” he most likely wasn’t denying the existence of another god, he was just trying to place this one called “**The Lord**” in line

beside those Egyptian idols (gods) he did recognize and worship – another member of the “team,” if you will. I envision him trying to conjure up a mental image of the “Lord” of Moses and Aaron to resemble in some way the ones we saw pictured above. His gods were made with human hands, and did nothing but sit on platforms or hang on a wall. They didn’t move or act or speak. So, he probably pictured Moses and Aaron bowing down in front of a statue of some sort on a pedestal somewhere, then coming up with their idea to rescue the Israelites out of Egypt – claiming that this statue was guiding their way. No wonder he scoffed at that notion! He had no idea what The God was capable of when he said to Moses and Aaron, ***“Show a miracle for yourselves.”*** (Exodus 7:9)

So, ***“Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it became a serpent (7:10).*** This was a clever ploy directed by Jehovah. Our omniscient God knew of Pharaoh’s ***“wise men, sorcerers, and magicians”*** and this simple miracle was meant to bait them into attempting to replicate it. Sure enough, ***“Pharaoh called the wise men and the sorcerers...”*** Notice that the Pharaoh called them. They weren’t standing around watching what Aaron had just done. I envision him dispatching a messenger to report to his magicians what had happened, thus allowing them time to work out a suitable response. Once he summoned his sorcerers, Pharaoh had played right into the Lord’s hands, so to speak. He was committed to this ill-advised contest between his people and the God of Heaven and a clear “winner” would be declared! We don’t know how many came, but verse 12 records, ***“...they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents...”*** This must have brought a smile to Ahmose’s face. His “wise men ” were as good at performing tricks as these men purporting to represent ***“The Lord”!***

There can be little doubt that the Egyptians’ serpents – though real – were products of some sort of “sleight of hand” illusion. Perhaps each of them hid a serpent in their robes until the opportune moment – can you imagine! – so they could appear to turn their rods into snakes. Whatever they did, it impressed Ahmose, and I imagine left him feeling rather smug...

Until, ***“...Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods.”*** That was no parlor trick, and the message it was meant to convey should have been crystal clear: our God is stronger than yours. But, ***“Pharaoh’s heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said.” (7:13).***

Snakes were all over the place in ancient Egypt! They were in the desert sands, in old walls, in fields, by the Nile and in its swamps. They were found on the threshing floors, in houses and in livestock enclosures and pastures. God's choice to use serpents in this introductory miracle may have been because snakes were worshiped by the ancient Egyptians, especially the cobra. This particular snake was associated with the sun god Ra, and other deities as well. Remember Osirus' staff with the head of a cobra? The Egyptians had some sort of a love/hate relationship with snakes. While some were dangerous and avoided, others were worshiped and viewed as a protector to the King. Interestingly, there is a portion of a papyrus (Dated between 589 – 525 BC) in the Brooklyn Museum which served as sort of a "how to manual" for treating snakebites. It reveals that the Egyptians had an intimate knowledge of snakes, and lists the names of thirty-seven different varieties that lived in Egypt at that time.

Although this "sign" was not one of the 10 plagues, it did serve a purpose: to enhance Moses' status with the Pharaoh. Albert Barnes says, *"This first miracle is performed simply to endorse the mission of the brothers, Moses and Aaron, and is simply 'credential,' without any infliction."*

Perhaps this is a good time to say a few words about God **"hardening the heart"** of someone. A version of this phrase is used 6 times in regard to the Pharaoh, and there are those who argue that passages which speak of God hardening human hearts imply that He is controlling that person, to the extent that they no longer have free will. Well, of course God does control everything – **He is the Creator and by Him all things exist** – but when He created man, He created him to think for himself and to choose his own path. Otherwise, humankind would be no more than robots. So, what does it really mean when it is said that God hardened the Pharaoh's heart?

While I don't agree with everything he says – Greg Boyd, a theologian, teacher, author, and president of [Reknew.org](http://Reknew.org) – has a good thought about the hardening of one's heart: He writes:

*“It’s difficult to reconcile the notion that God hardens people’s hearts, so they won’t believe, with Jesus’ unqualified love for the world. When we see Christ hanging in love on the cross to reconcile us to Him, we see the Father (John 14:7-9). This self-sacrificial love is what God looks like. Christ is God’s exact imprint. How is this revelation compatible with the frightful suggestion that God arbitrarily hardens people’s hearts to keep them from coming to him? Since there is no adequate answer to that question, there is no reason to suppose that this is what these passages mean.”*

Like Mr. Boyd, I believe there is another answer to be found, and it lies in the root meaning of the Hebrew words translated “*harden*” in our bibles. The word translated “*harden*” is a compound form of three Hebrew words – “***Kabad, Qashah, ayth.***” These three words make up the translation “*harden*” and mean “***to strengthen***” and “***make heavy, dense, or tough.***” Therefore, when God hardens a person’s heart He is not changing a thought that was there – or putting a thought in the person’s heart – but instead is **strengthening** the resolve of whatever the person *has already decided* in his own heart – by his own will! The bottom line then, is this: God knows our hearts. And, in every instance where the scriptures speak of God hardening someone’s heart, that person had already made the decision to do their own will over God’s, and the “hardening” is more of an act of God’s judgment in response to decisions already made.

So, in the scenario of the book of Exodus, we now understand that Ahmose has already made up his mind to not let the people go, and God’s “**strengthening**” of the Pharaoh’s will is merely Him recognizing the Pharaoh’s decision and judging him for making it. And, it’s a teachable moment: Jehovah can now demonstrate His power as the only true God!

How different is Pharaoh’s response as a non-believer and 21st century non-believers who choose to reject the truth no matter how much proof we place before them? God’s power was demonstrated very clearly to the Pharaoh, yet he turned away. His mind was made up.

God's will for us is laid out very clearly in the scriptures, yet many turn away. They see what they want to see in His words. Their minds are already made up.

So, with their “credentials” now established, God is ready for Moses and Aaron to demonstrate their Lord's power – in increasing degrees of severity – through ten plagues. Each of these events seems to center around the false gods that the Egyptians worshiped. While they certainly “plagued” the Egyptians, they could also be called the “Ten Miracles.” Frequently in scripture, numbers carry a symbolic meaning as well as numerical significance. Depending on the context in which it is found, the number 10 can have as many as three additional meanings beyond the literal. Yes, Jehovah did really bring 10 plagues on Egypt, but there's more to it than just that:

1. The number 10 can signify “**Power**” or “**Rule.**” In Revelation 13, we see a beast with 10 horns signifying the power he had through the Great Dragon.
2. The number 10 can also refer to “**Fullness to a superlative or unlimited degree.**” We still see this meaning in use today: someone beautiful in every way is described as “a perfect 10.”
3. It can also be used as a “**multiplier,**” beyond the number 10 – like 100 or 1000, and is usually expressed as a “**rounded total**” regardless of the actual number.

As I said above, the symbolic meaning depends on context and setting, so, in the case of the 10 plagues:

- A. The number is literal – there actually were 10 of them.
- B. The number symbolizes **Power:** In each of these plagues, God exercises His control – His Power – over nature!
- C. The number symbolizes “**Fullness to a superlative or unlimited degree!**” When the 10 plagues are over, everyone in Egypt, from the Pharaoh to the lowest slave, will be made fully aware – to a “superlative or unlimited degree” – of the omnipotence and power of the One True God! And, when His people are granted exodus, God will

have completed what He set out to do in a superlative degree – He will have rescued His people from the most powerful nation on earth!

### Continuing the narrative –

Before we discuss the first of the 10 plagues, let's return to the beginning of the chapter, when the Lord sends Moses back to Ahmose after his first failed meeting with him from chapter 5. Moses could not have been thrilled by these instructions. The last time he attempted to influence this Pharaoh, he succeeded only in making the Israelites' lives more difficult – their workload was increased – and they, no doubt, lost faith in him as a leader, as well. This is speculation on my part, but discouragement and reluctance would have been a natural reaction for Moses to have. God warns him to expect rejection again, but that there is something to be accomplished by this rejection: ***“But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay My hand on Egypt and bring My armies and My people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments.”***

Even though there have been battles before —remember when Abraham rescued Lot in Genesis 14 — this is the first time God mentions ***“My armies”***. We've already discussed the 600,000 men on foot (12:37) that were numbered as part of the exodus, designating those of an age to go into battle. These were His armies and they will be needed to fight against the Canaanites and take the land promised to Abraham many years earlier. And, of course, these ***“great judgments”*** are for the purpose of showing the Egyptians that He is the Lord!

Note that God says, ***“See, I have made you as god to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.”*** This simply means that through these miracles (Aaron's rod and the plagues) Jehovah is going to make it appear to the Pharaoh that Moses has the power to accomplish these great things. And, in so doing, the relationship between this Israelite and the most powerful king on earth will change: no longer will Moses be a mere man in the presence of a superior power when he meets with Ahmose. Even a Pharaoh doesn't outrank a god! Now, Moses becomes the superior presence (a god) who relates to Aaron (his prophet) all that Jehovah



has said. Aaron, the “mouthpiece”, then speaks before Pharaoh. And, of course, each time a miracle is wrought, they give credit to the Almighty God.

I already mentioned that the plagues grow more severe as they progress. They also progressively demonstrate to all who witness them that the powers of nature are subject to the will of Jehovah! Even though the first plague will have consequences for the Egyptians, it will not inflict severe loss or suffering. However, afterwards in rapid succession, come plagues that are ruinous and devastating: murrain, boils, hail and lightning, locusts, darkness, and finally, the death of the firstborn. Let me reiterate something that is often missed in these miracles: each of the inflictions is directly aimed at some Egyptian god, superstition or custom.

### **The First Plague – All of Egypt’s water turning to Blood:**

Verse 14 begins “...*the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the people go. Get thee unto Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goeth out unto the water; and thou shalt stand by the river's brink against he come; and the rod which was turned to a serpent shalt thou take in thine hand...*” (KJV)



**The Nile River just north of Memphis (taken in 1985)**

We are not told why Pharaoh was going down to the river that particular morning, but it could have been to worship because the Egyptians held the Nile as being a religious entity for the



purity and clear taste of its water. Some commentators believe it was the Pharaoh's duty to offer a sacrifice to the Nile, from its bank. The Nile River became known as the "Father of Life" and the "Mother of All Men" in Egypt and was considered to be the manifestation of two Egyptian gods: **HAPI**, who blessed the land with life, and the goddess **MAAT**, who embodied the concepts of truth, harmony, and balance. The Nile River evidenced those concepts, and was later linked to **ISIS** and **OSIRIS**.

Originally, though, the god **KHNUM** was the god of the Nile and it was he who controlled its flow and sent the necessary yearly floods which the people depended on to fertilize the land. So it could be that Ahmose had gone down to the river to worship the Nile and its gods **KHNUM**, **ISIS**, and **OSIRIS**



**Painting by Bartholomeus Breenbergh – painted in 1631**

Moses was to stand by the river holding the rod that had previously been turned into a serpent, and position himself so that the Pharaoh could not get to the water without coming near

to him. He was to again repeat God's demand that His people be released, and warn the Pharaoh that if he did not listen, this time there would be consequences. Moses was then to give the rod to Aaron who, upon Moses' command, would walk down to the river and strike it with the rod!

The painting at the bottom of the previous page depicts Moses meeting the Pharaoh down near the Nile River, beside one of the ruins (rather than in the palace as sometimes erroneously depicted – even though other miracles did take place there).

You can see the Pharaoh at the center, bottom of the painting. His robe is being held by a small boy behind him. Moses and Aaron are to the right – Moses standing erect and looking toward the Pharaoh and Aaron bent over striking the bank of the river with his rod. Perhaps the group of men standing to the left of the Pharaoh is the magicians of Pharaoh's court.

The consequences were made clear: ***“By this you shall know that I am the Lord. Behold, I will strike the waters which are in the river with the rod that is in my hand, and they shall be turned to blood. And the fish that are in the river shall die, the river shall stink, and the Egyptians will loathe to drink the water of the river.”***

In other words, “Don't say I didn't warn you.” What was about to happen would be no surprise. In fact, being told in advance exactly what was going to occur, lent “stature” to the miracle. In verse 17 God says, ***“You shall know that I am the Lord.”*** This phrase is directed, not only to Pharaoh, but also to his people. I don't believe the Pharaoh, Aaron and Moses were standing by the river alone. I suspect the painting above might more closely depicts this meeting to include other witnesses – probably his advisors and servants. What they were about to behold would spread quickly among the people. And through these miracles, God will send a pointed message – ten separate times, actually – to the Egyptian people: I am the Lord!

And here it begins: the water of the Nile River – the very heart of their prosperity – becomes blood! As you might expect, there is a lot of controversy about whether or not we are speaking of real blood.

Wayne Jackson, writing in *“The Christian Courier”* (01/17/2022) quotes a college professor who believes that *“the Bible contains much that is ‘myth.’”* including, of course, the text of Exodus 7:17-25. He goes on to suggest that this so-called miracle is easily explained as a case of red-colored silt that churned into the water of the Nile during the flooding season of that river! Actually, this attempt to explain away supernatural events in the scriptures is nothing new. For example, in 1956 Werner Keller wrote in *The Bible As History* that *“Deposits from the Abyssinian lakes often color the flood waters a dark reddish brown, especially in the Upper Nile, and that might well be said to look like ‘blood’.”*

Mr. Jackson (*The Christian Courier*) continues: *“Misguided attempts to ‘befriend’ the Bible, by helping to provide ‘natural’ explanations for such events as the plagues of Egypt are seriously in error, no matter how well-intentioned the commentator may be, and quite frankly, most of the time such objections are skeptically motivated.”*

The following brief points are offered in rebuttal:

1. The biblical account plainly says that the waters of Egypt “turned to blood” (vv. 17-20), and while it is true that the term “blood” may be employed at times in a figurative sense (cf. Joel 2:31), the context must require it, and there is no such necessity in Exodus 7! The exact same Hebrew term **“dawn”** is used here in Exodus 7:17 and again in chapter 12:7 in the description of the tenth plague. So, I ask these skeptics: “When the Israelites were instructed to put **“dawn”** on their doorposts, do you think it was actually “muddy water”?”
2. The bible record conveys the impression that the waters of Egypt changed immediately when Aaron smote the water of the Nile with his rod. Pharaoh and his servants saw the water change as they watched. (vv. 17 - 20) Silting, however, brings about a gradual discoloration of the water.
3. While there is occasionally a silt influx on the Nile River, and the water does turn a “muddy reddish” color, this phenomenon (which usually occurs in late summer and

early fall) was considered a blessing by the Egyptians! Yet the “blood” phenomenon was considered a curse (“foul,” “loathsome,” and “undrinkable”) from which they sought relief. (vv. 18 - 21)

4. Silting does not cause the fish to die.
5. Silting did not produce a distinct “stink.” (v. 18) In fact, normally, the water of the Nile River is “sweet of fragrance” (*James Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near-Eastern Texts, Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1969, p. 272*).
6. And finally, Silting cannot account for the fact that ALL water turned to blood: “***And there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in buckets of wood and pitchers of stone.***” (v 19)

Some would say, “Well, it just LOOKED like blood.” The Old Testament text does not even remotely suggest that the Nile merely took on the “color” of blood. There is biblical language to express that concept when necessary (2 Kings 3:22 – “...***saw the water on the other side as red as blood,***”) Here, however, the statement is: “...***the water turned to blood***” (v. 17), which means it became blood!

George Rawlinson, Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford, wrote:

*“It is idle to ask whether the water would have answered to all the modern tests, microscopic and other, by which blood is known. The question cannot be answered. All that we are entitled to conclude from the words of the text is, that the water had all the physical appearance — the look, taste, smell, and texture of blood; and hence, it was certainly NOT merely discolored by the red soil of Abyssinia, nor by plants or infusoria. And, water thus changed would neither kill fish, nor ‘stink,’ nor be utterly undrinkable.”*

(“The Book of Exodus,” Pulpit Commentary, Eerdmans, 1961)

Recently, another hypothesis, one of “red algae,” has surfaced but it’s a waste of our time to give these theories much space. I only mention them so that you are aware of how far-reaching Satan’s influence is over unbelievers or those weak in faith. Some researchers, scientists and archaeologists who are trusted by the public deny the existence of God at all, while others claim they believe in God, but...can’t let go of what’s “logical” when they read of supernatural events in scripture. Actually, anyone who accepts the words of Genesis 1:1, ***“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,”*** should have no trouble accepting everything that comes afterwards. Everything! As I read the feeble attempts of these “experts” to explain away God’s power – using the very intellect that God gave them – it deeply saddens me to know so many people out there will trust in *their* knowledge, instead of in the power and omniscience of the great I AM.

No, this miracle was just that – a miracle – and clearly the first of many assaults upon the powerless Egyptian gods. They worshiped this river, remember, and it was rendered useless for one week by the touch of Aaron’s rod, that is, the “touch” of God’s mighty hand.

In verses 22 and 23, we see that the sign is duplicated by the Pharaoh’s magicians, thus sending a skeptical Pharaoh back to his palace, determined to believe it is all trickery. There are some unanswerable questions here. We don’t know how his sorcerers were able to do this, or to what extent. We do know that the Egyptians were without water for an entire week, and that they were desperately digging around the river trying to find it. Meanwhile the Pharaoh sat in his palace convinced that all he had seen at the water’s edge – and continued to witness for an entire week – dead fish, blood in independent pools and individual containers, a disgusting stench over the land – was nothing more than “smoke and mirrors.” My words to his magicians would have been this: “If you were able to turn the water to blood... then turn it back!” But as we know, his heart was hardened.

***“And seven days were fulfilled, after that the Lord had smitten the river.”***