

Study Notes: Exodus 7:14-24
August 16, 2026: “The Nile Turns to Blood!”
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Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the river. Confront him on the bank of the Nile, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. Then say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness. But until now you have not listened.

- After Pharaoh refused to listen to Moses and Aaron (Exodus 7:13) when they gave the sign of the staff into a snake, the LORD spoke to Moses and called him to confront Pharaoh again, this time on the banks of the Nile.
 - The New American Commentary highlights the prominence of Pharaoh’s hard heart in this first plague narrative, “Prominent in the structure of this first plague account is the emphasis on God’s involvement in Pharaoh’s stubbornness. Verses 14 and 22–23 function as something of an inclusion for the passage, reminding the reader that Moses knew directly from God that Pharaoh would be resistant (v. 14) and that he would not be moved easily, even by things supernatural (vv. 22–23).”
- The Nile was the source of life for Egypt. It provided for physical needs and also drove the economy of Egypt. The Egyptians also worshipped gods who were associated with the Nile, including Hapi, who represented fertility and abundance, and Khnum, who was considered the god of the river itself.
 - The New American Commentary adds, “In considering the story of the first plague, it is important to bear in mind that the Egyptians understood the Nile to be a god. Their pantheistic view of the universe considered all things to be partakers of the divine, and things that moved to be obviously divine in their essence. The ultimate victory of the only true God, Yahweh, over the many false gods of the Egyptians (‘judgment on the gods of Egypt,’ 12:12) began with the humiliation of the Nile. The nation’s great waterway and source of life was turned odious and made into a source of death (7:18), demonstrating the sovereign power of the God of Israel and the subordinate impotence of the Nile.”
- Moses was instructed to give Pharaoh a command from YHWH. The message was the same: Pharaoh was to let the people go so they could worship YHWH in the wilderness. Pharaoh had not yet listened to the Lord.

This is what the Lord says: By this you will know that I am the Lord: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.”

- Because Pharaoh had not listened, YHWH was going to prove that YHWH was who He said He is. Moses was instructed to strike the Nile with his staff, which would cause it to turn to blood. YHWH had already spoken about this plague as one of the signs that would prove that He is the LORD earlier in His calling of Moses (Exodus 4:9).
- When the river turned to blood, the effects would be devastating. The fish would die, the river would stink, and the water would be undrinkable.
- This plague would represent the YHWH’s power over the very source of life for Egypt. It is also an allusion to the blood that Pharaoh shed when he ordered the male children to be thrown into the Nile (Exodus 1:22).

The Lord said to Moses, “Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs—and they will turn to blood.’ Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone.”

- Just as was arranged earlier (Exodus 7:1-2), Moses was to speak to Aaron, who would act and speak to Pharaoh. Moses told Aaron to stretch out his staff over the waters of Egypt, all of which would turn to blood.
- This plague impacted not just the Nile, but its tributaries and all the surface water of Egypt, even the water that had been collected in vessels. YHWH was displaying His power over the land and its gods.

Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt.

- Once again, the Bible records that Moses and Aaron were obedient to the command of YHWH. Everything happened just as YHWH had said. All the water turned to blood, which had devastating consequences on the land.
 - Scholars note that the Hebrew word for blood (*dām*) may have referred to the color of the Nile rather than to actual human or animal blood. Even if this was the case, the plague still represented a supernatural act of God with devastating consequences for the Egyptians.
- This plague impacted the entirety of Egypt; however, it seems to only impact the Egyptian people directly. The Faithlife Study Bible explains, “While some of the plagues did not affect the territory of Goshen where the Israelites lived (8:22; 9:26), no such qualifier is included in this passage. However, the text only records that the Egyptians could not drink the water of the Nile, which may imply that the Israelites were not affected.”

But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh’s heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said. Instead, he turned and went into his palace, and did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile to get drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the river.

- Just as the Egyptian magicians replicated the miracle of the staff into a snake, they also replicated this miracle, which caused Pharaoh’s heart to become hard.
 - The Faithlife Study Bible notes, “Rather than solve the problem, the Egyptian magicians worsen it. Their ability to mimic turning water into blood suggests the act was magical trickery (see note on v. 12). However, their skill cannot match the scale of what God does through Moses (v. 19).”
- Pharaoh was unmoved by the miracle, but the people of Egypt were greatly impacted. They had no water to drink, and they had to dig for water along the Nile.
 - The New American Commentary speaks of the larger impact of this plague, “No longer were the mighty acts of God confined to demonstrations for a private audience. Now all the citizens of the nation began to feel the effect of God’s wrath, and the pressure began to ratchet up on Pharaoh. It was one thing for him to ignore a display intended to convince him of God’s power but another to ignore the cries of his people for one of their most basic needs, water to drink.”