

# OpenTheo

## February 28th: Exodus 7 & Matthew 12:22-50

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The beginning of the Ten Plagues. Casting out Satan and Christ's true family.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 15:12 (the earth 'swallowing' the Egyptians at the Red Sea); Psalm 74:14, Ezekiel 29:3-5 (the Egyptians and the sea monster); Ezekiel 32:2-6 (the blood of the sea monster filling the land).

Luke 11:20, Exodus 8:19 (the finger of God); Acts 7 (Stephen's speech); Deuteronomy 32:5, 20 (an evil and adulterous generation); Luke 1:45 (blessed is she who believed).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Exodus 7 And the Lord said to Moses, See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you.

Then I will lay my hand on Egypt, and bring my hosts, my people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt, and bring out the people of Israel from among them. Moses and Aaron did so.

They did just as the Lord commanded them. Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh. Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, When Pharaoh says to you, Prove yourselves by working a miracle, then you shall say to Aaron, Take your staff, and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh, and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts.

For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out of the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent.

And you shall say to him, The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness. But so far you have not obeyed. Thus says the Lord, By this you shall know that I am the Lord.

Behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile. And the Lord said to Moses, Say to Aaron, Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over the rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood.

And there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone. Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood.

And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts.

So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them as the Lord had

said. Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not even take this to heart. And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.

Seven full days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile. In Exodus chapter 7 we reach the beginning of the story of the plagues. Moses is still discouraged after the failure of his initial approach to Pharaoh and the people's refusal to listen to him, and he feels very keenly his weaknesses at the end of the previous chapter, the fact that he is a person of uncircumcised lips.

And God declares that just as he was to be as God to Aaron, speaking to him as God's representative, so he is to be as God to Pharaoh, with Aaron as his prophet. Moses will speak words that have been given to him by the Lord, but he will speak those words as one who is standing for the Lord, as one who is representing him in a fuller way. God declares what he is going to do beforehand, so that it is clear that when it happens he has been in control throughout.

God is not just muddling through events, responding to things as they come up. God knows exactly what he's going to do. He calls the fact that Pharaoh is going to resist, and he makes clear that that has always been part of the plan.

The statement made to Pharaoh is more absolute now. There's not just a mention of a three day's journey into the wilderness to worship. He must let the people go.

Pharaoh began by asking, who is the Lord that I should obey his voice? And now God is going to demonstrate exactly who he is to the Egyptians. God doesn't just want to get his people out of Egypt. He's going to confirm his identity as the Lord to the Israelites, to Pharaoh, to the Egyptians, and then to the entire world.

God says that he is going to stiffen the heart of Pharaoh, and there are a number of different words used in relationship to the heart of Pharaoh. At some points it talks about stiffening his heart. At other points it talks about the deadening, or making heavy of his heart, making it heavy and unresponsive.

And then at other points, his heart is strengthened. These things are not necessarily the same. It's also important to notice that sometimes Pharaoh does this to his own heart, and sometimes God does it to his heart.

There are a variety of different actions then, which aren't necessarily the same. And as we go through the narrative, it will become clear that these different actions serve different purposes. We should also recognize that on some level there is an openness to Pharaoh's future.

Some way in which things could go differently. If he did respond, the story of the Exodus might take a very different course. And this is held out as a genuine possibility, I believe.

Moses has previously performed a series of three signs before Israel to confirm his identity and his mission. And now Aaron is called to perform a confirmatory sign before Pharaoh. Aaron squares off against the magicians of Egypt, while Moses squares off against Pharaoh himself.

And the fact that Aaron is as the prophet to Moses, and Moses is as God to Pharaoh, presents them as having different levels of opposition. While the magicians are around, Aaron's role is important. He is the one who is particularly conflicting with them.

As if it were the pawns on the board that need to be dealt with first, and then we'll get to the back row, the king, who's lying behind them. In the first three of the plagues, this conflict between Aaron and the magicians is prominent. And then later on, it's Pharaoh and Moses, and then Pharaoh and Yahweh himself.

The staff is cast to the ground and it becomes a dragon or sea monster. The word here is different from the word used earlier for the serpent. And when the staff of Moses is referred back to, it's spoken of as the one that turned into a serpent, not the dragon or the sea monster, as Aaron's staff turns into.

Aaron produces a dragon from his staff, but so do the Egyptian magicians. And the Egyptians seem to use spells or arts or trickery to achieve the same effect. That sort of effect can be achieved with a particular way of holding a snake.

And so maybe they're doing that sort of thing. However, Aaron's rod consumes theirs. And I think, among other things, this is a sign of the Red Sea, which swallowed the Egyptian dragon in its watery depth.

The same language is used for swallowing in chapter 15, verse 12, where the earth swallows the Egyptian men. We should also recognise that there is some connection between the Egyptians and the sea monster. In Psalm 74, verses 13 and 14, So it's retelling the story of the Red Sea crossing and the destruction of the Egyptians at the Red Sea.

And there they're described as sea monsters, as Leviathan, this great sea monster, the sea beast. And it's destroyed in the waters. The heads are crushed.

And in a similar way, the serpent of the Egyptians is crushed or defeated by the serpent of Israel, by the dragon that Aaron's rod turns into. Again, that can relate to the imagery of the Red Sea, where you have this path through the sea, serpent-like path throughout the sea. And then the sea itself as some great sea monster swallowing up the Egyptians that enter into it.

Further reference to Egypt as a sea monster can be found in the book of Ezekiel, chapter 29, verses 3 to 5. And this is a prologue to the plagues. It's also an anticipation of the great climactic event of the Red Sea crossing. It highlights the importance of the rod and

also the importance of the stubbornness of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh responds with stubbornness when his magicians can replicate the sign. It's also, ironically, in response to Pharaoh's own request for a wonder. The plagues are called signs and wonders in verse 3. They're meaningful portents of judgment.

They're also a pattern of decreation. God is taking his creation and throwing it into a sort of tumult and chaos. He's breaking apart the order and making that order unravel and turn against man.

The plagues have some sort of pattern to them. There are three sets of three plagues and then a climactic final plague. The first plague in each sequence of three, 1, 2, 3, and then 4, 5, 6, and then 7, 8, 9. The first plague of each sequence, the first, the fourth, and the seventh, begins with Moses rising early in the morning and speaking to Pharaoh, generally as he comes out of the water.

The second plague, he comes to Pharaoh, presumably at the palace, to warn him, presumably during the day. And then the final plague, there is no warning. There's no opportunity to change course, maybe associated with the evening.

The plagues also seem to move upwards. They move from the very base of Egypt, the Nile, up throughout the whole building, from the waters beneath the earth to the heavens above the earth. Every single part of the creation is being touched by God's judgment and testifying to his authority.

Another thing that's important to recognize is that this is drawing our attention back to the initial events of chapter 1. Moses threw the baby boys into the Nile. This is the covered up graveyard of Egypt. They've concealed the bodies in this place.

And now the blood of those bodies is calling out from the water. This is a nation that's built on covering up its crime. And now the creation itself is refusing to collaborate.

There's a sign of Egypt's crime that's unmistakable and unavoidable. It's also a sign of God's remembrance of Israel's suffering. They might have been wondering, has anyone seen this? The waters of the Nile continue to flow day by day as if there were no bodies in there at all.

As if our children had not been killed within this river. But now the creation itself testifies to the sin of the Egyptians. It's also an anticipation of the blood of the Egyptians themselves.

In the book of Ezekiel chapter 32 there's a similar judgment made upon Pharaoh. It's a promise there that God will judge the people. This is a warning.

Now it's important to consider why God doesn't just whisk his people out of Egypt. He

could do that. He could deliver them in one fell swoop.

Without any need for all of these different plagues. The plagues seem to be serving a purpose beyond merely getting the Israelites out of the land. They seem to be serving a pedagogical purpose.

A purpose of teaching the Egyptians and teaching others who God is. And also teaching them about their sin so that they might repent. This plague brings to light the crime of the Egyptians.

And it does so in a way that causes discomfort but not death. They could repent. If they really took the lesson of this plague to heart they could turn around.

And many within Egypt presumably do. Another thing that's possibly going on here is a challenge to the divinity of the Nile. To Happy, this God who claims authority over the Nile.

Is being defeated on his home turf. The God of the Hebrews is more powerful than the God at the heart of the very life of Egypt. Some further things to notice here.

Some of the context for the performance of the sign might recall the deliverance of Moses and the role of Pharaoh's daughter in chapter 2. Another thing is that the differing agency of Moses and Aaron is important. Both of them have rod actions to perform. Moses strikes the central course of the Nile and then Aaron judges the other rivers and the other water bodies.

However, the Egyptian magicians can replicate the effect and as a result Pharaoh stiffens his heart. They can't provide relief but they can repeat the effect. And as a result there is no repentance.

And the scene is set for the continuing of the signs and the wonders into the chapter that follows. A question to consider. The first plague highlights the sin of the Egyptians.

And does so in a way that gives them the opportunity to repent. But it makes the fact of that sin unavoidable to them. The ugliness of the sin, the pollution of the sin and the extent of the sin are all presented to them powerfully by the symbol of the water being turned to blood.

It also offers them a warning of what will happen to them if they do not in fact repent. It's an anticipation of what happens at the Red Sea later on. What are some of the ways in which the grace of God can be seen even in his acts of judgment and punishment in scripture more generally? Matthew chapter 12 verses 22 to 50.

But when the Pharisees heard it they said, Therefore they will be your judges. Well how can someone enter a strongman's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the

strongman? Then indeed he may plunder his house. Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people.

But the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of the good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.

But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it, except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation, and condemn it.

For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the south will rise up at the judgment with this generation, and condemn it. For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, I will return to my house from which I came. And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order.

Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

In the second half of Matthew chapter 12, Jesus deals with the question of how he performs his exorcisms, and also with the issue of true membership of the people of God.

The question of how Jesus casts out demons, and the claim that he does so by the power of Satan himself, is one that occurs on a number of occasions within the Gospel of Matthew. And it's an important one.

It's one that Jesus highlights elsewhere. It's important to consider how much of Jesus' ministry is focused upon direct conflict with Satan and demonic forces. Jesus isn't just a teacher or even a healer or a miracle worker.

He's an exorcist. He's someone who drives out evil spirits. Like David who gave relief to Saul, who was troubled by an evil spirit after the Spirit of God left him.

So Jesus, as David's greater son, brings relief to the people of Israel who are troubled by evil spirits. The Pharisees accuse him of acting in the power of Beelzebul, or Beelzebub, the lord of the flies, or maybe the lord of the garbage heap. If this were the case though, Jesus argues, Satan's kingdom would be doomed, as it would be divided against itself, seeking to cast out itself.

And they aren't even consistent in their accusations, for if they were, they'd be accusing their own disciples and sons who cast out demons. Jesus seems to acknowledge here that there are others who are performing exorcisms. But his exorcisms seem to be operating on a different level.

He is casting out by the Spirit of God, which is proof that the kingdom of God has come upon Israel. He's conquering the oppressed land for God. Now other exorcists seem to cast out demons using incantations, bizarre rituals, and other things along those lines.

Whereas Christ does so by his powerful and authoritative word, something that's noted in the Gospels, that with a word he can cast out demons. It's his own authority that he's doing this with, it's not with some special trick or some ritual that he has to perform. He has personal authority over the demonic realm.

The demons recognise him and tremble. Jesus binds the strongman and as a result can plunder his house. In Luke 11, verse 20, there's a reference to the finger of God in this same saying, which suggests that the story of the Exodus might be in the background here.

As the Egyptian magicians speak about the plagues being performed by the finger of God, that they can't replicate them at a certain point. That is a sign that God is acting. And likewise here, God is acting in Jesus Christ in a way that proves there's a new Exodus type event taking place.

In this moment in history, things have narrowed to a point and there are no places to stand on the sideline. You can't be neutral. You're either for or against Christ, either gathering with him or scattering.



And Jesus presents this alternative very clearly to people, that they don't have the opportunity to just stand back and be neutral. In verses 31 and 32, Jesus declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And this is contrasted with speaking against the Son of Man.

The best way of understanding this, I believe, is to read it against the background of redemptive history. In Stephen's speech in the book of Acts, for instance, he speaks about two visitations. About Joseph when he first is rejected by his brothers and then the second time when he brings them salvation.

Likewise with Moses. And the same is true of Christ. He first comes in humility in his earthly ministry.

But then, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit is given to continue the ministry of Christ. To continue it in power in the ministry of the Church. However, if Israel reject not just Christ in his earthly ministry, but also the ministry of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit, they are not just blaspheming against the Son of Man, they're also blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

Or as we read in Hebrews chapter 6, they're crucifying Christ again. They crucified him once, now they are crucifying him again, in rejecting the ministry of the Gospel through the Church. The Pharisees' rejection of Christ, and more particularly their accusation that he is acting by the power of Satan himself, is a manifestation of the state of their hearts.

And it will be for this reason that they reject the ministry of the Church too when that comes along. Bad trees cannot bear good fruit. They are a brood of vipers.

And that image is that they are children of the great serpent. That they are the seed of the serpent, rather than the seed of the woman. Jesus draws particular attention to the relationship between the heart and the tongue.

This is a common theme in the wisdom literature, for instance, in the book of Proverbs and elsewhere. Speech manifests the heart. And the themes here might also relate to the healing and exorcism that has provoked this discourse in the first place.

Jesus has healed a mute and blind man who was oppressed by a demon. And it seems that the oppression of the demon prevented the man from seeing and from speaking. In a similar manner, the people who are accusing him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul are displaying the failure of their faculties of speech and of perception as a result of their demonically oppressed hearts.

Some of the scribes and Pharisees then ask him for a sign. And Jesus refuses to give any sign apart from the sign of the prophet Jonah. And note the similarity with the challenge of Satan earlier on in chapter 4. If you are the son of God, then do this great sign.

Jesus declares them to be an evil and adulterous generation. And this recalls the language of Moses during the Exodus. In Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 5, They have dealt corruptly with him.

They are no longer his children, because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation. And again in verse 20 of that same chapter, They are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness.

Why are they given the sign of Jonah? Jesus, among other things, is declaring in advance what he is going to do in his death and resurrection, so that when it happens it will be very clear that it was intended. As we read in John's Gospel on a number of occasions in particular, Jesus said a number of things in his ministry that were not understood at the time, but afterwards they were understood to be confirmatory statements that made clear that Christ knew all along what he was about to do. Such sayings encouraged faith later on as they were brought to mind.

Jonah's generation was described as adulterous, and Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh, among other reasons, as a sign of God's judgment of leaving Israel and going to the nations, provoking Israel to jealousy by showing others mercy. The Israel of Jesus' day would experience the same thing. The book of Jonah is also a sign to Israel of its own judgment of exile, but then its deliverance from that.

There is a lot of symbolism in the book of Jonah, as Jonah's sin leads to the shaking up of the waters and trouble for the sailors on the boat. They have to cast Jonah into the sea, and then Jonah is swallowed by this big fish. As he prays to God in the belly of this big fish, he is later vomited out on the land.

And the second half of the book of Jonah, chapters 3-4, parallel the first two chapters in other ways. It is the story of two missions of Jonah, the dove. It's a story that brings to mind ark themes, not just in the fact that it's two missions of a dove, but in other respects as well.

God is preparing an ark for his people in Nineveh itself, and the emphasis upon the cattle and their involvement within all the events, the events of the fasting, that God is concerned for the cattle at the very end of the book, and the way that Nineveh is described, the numbers associated with it, suggest a connection between Noah's ark and Nineveh. God is preparing to cast his people into the sea. They've caused upset in the region because of their sin, and they have to be cast into exile.

But God is preparing a big fish of Nineveh to swallow them up. And as they are swallowed up, if they pray to God in the belly of that big fish, they will be delivered. Likewise, as we go through, we can see that the gourd that provides shade to Jonah also represents the way that the rising kingdom of Assyria in the north provided shade from the Aramean kingdoms, and gave Israel the chance for its borders to expand.

All of these are things that speak not just to a story of an individual prophet, but to the political situation of that day. And in the same way, Christ is giving a message to his generation. The Israel of Jesus' day would experience something very similar.

It would also experience being cast out. Christ himself will be cast into the sea of the Gentiles, but he will rise up, and Jesus' whole mission is a sign. He is the sign.

The resurrection in particular confirms this. Jesus is not going to perform just a single great wonder to demonstrate his identity. His identity will be demonstrated by the full scope of his work, and the way that that work relates to the destiny of the people as a whole.

Christ is the greater than Jonah, but he's also the greater than Solomon, whom the Queen of Sheba travelled to see. He's God's wisdom in person, not just the wisest man, as Solomon was. Rather, he's God's wisdom come in human flesh.

Note again that it's a Gentile being summoned as a witness against them. We've seen this in Tyre and Sidon, in Sodom and Gomorrah, and now with the Queen of Sheba. All these characters, and the character of Jonah, who goes to the people of Nineveh, and they repent, whereas the people of Israel do not repent.

In all of the witnesses being brought forth, we're having some indication of the way that the story is heading. Christ drives demons out of Israel, to the wilderness, the place of the evil spirits. But if Israel does not fill the house of the nation with God's presence, things will become even worse for them.

It's important to consider the fate of that generation. They were indeed possessed by more evil spirits than the first. And in the 60s, in this outpouring of revolution and rebellion and messianic fervour, they ended up leading to their destruction in AD 70.

Their failure to respond appropriately to Jesus' casting out of the earlier demons was, in many ways, part of what led to that crisis. Jesus' family wait outside, wanting to speak to him. But Jesus makes clear that blood relations are secondary to, and relativised by, the bonds of the kingdom.

His truest kinship is with the brotherhood of his disciples around him. Once again, it's important to notice that this doesn't just pit these things against each other as opponents. While they can be at direct odds with each other, as we see in some Jesus teaching in these contexts, there is also the fact that Jesus' family relations are largely taken up into and transformed within the life of the kingdom.

Note, for instance, that Mary's blessing is not simply on account of some biological connection to Jesus, but because she received Christ, being conceived in her, in submission to the will of God and believed that God would fulfil his word to her. Mary's blessing is not merely the fact that she bears Christ biologically. She's blessed as the

archetypal believer, not merely as the natural mother.

We become as Christ's mother when we receive the word of the Lord like Mary did, and we become as Christ's brothers and sisters as we follow him and are faithful to the will of God as he is. A question to consider. How can the shared life of the kingdom of God transform the way that we relate to the believing members of our own families?