

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 7

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 7 opens the formal confrontation between Yahweh and Pharaoh, functioning as both the commissioning of Moses and Aaron and the inauguration of the plague cycle. The chapter divides naturally into two movements. The first (vv. 1–7) is Yahweh’s renewed commissioning speech: Moses is appointed as “god” to Pharaoh, Aaron as his prophet, and Yahweh explicitly announces that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart in order to multiply His signs and wonders, so that Egypt will know that He is Yahweh. The ages of Moses (eighty) and Aaron (eighty-three) are noted — underscoring that these are not young men acting on ambition but men formed and positioned by divine timing. The second movement (vv. 8–25) presents two confrontations: the staff-to-serpent sign (vv. 8–13), in which Aaron’s staff swallows the staffs of Pharaoh’s magicians yet Pharaoh’s heart remains hardened, and the first plague — the Nile turned to blood (vv. 14–25) — in which Pharaoh again refuses to relent. The chapter closes with Pharaoh turning away, unmoved.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to establish, before the full plague cycle unfolds, that what is about to happen is not a contest between equals — it is a sovereign demonstration. Yahweh is not reacting to Pharaoh’s stubbornness; He is engineering the entire sequence to accomplish a disclosure of Himself that cannot be achieved any other way. The intent for the reader is to produce a particular kind of confidence: that when God moves in history, He moves with complete sovereignty over both the resistant and the willing, over both the hardened heart and the obedient servant. The reader is meant to understand that divine purposes are not frustrated by human refusal — they are, in some cases, advanced through it.

Subject Sentence: Yahweh commissions Moses, confronts Pharaoh, and begins His sovereign demonstration against Egypt.

Primary Claim: God does not merely respond to Pharaoh’s hardness — He governs it, so that His power and name will be displayed beyond what simple compliance could ever achieve. The reader is called to rest in the absolute sovereignty of God even when — especially when — resistance seems to be winning.

Interpretive Evaluation

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart

The most significant interpretive issue in Exodus 7 is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (vv. 3–4, 13). Three broad positions exist among orthodox interpreters.

The Arminian/Wesleyan reading holds that God's hardening is responsive — God hardens what Pharaoh has already chosen to harden through his own free will, essentially “giving Pharaoh over” to the direction he has chosen. On this reading, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are preserved by sequencing them: Pharaoh's free choice is logically prior, God's hardening is logically subsequent. This reading has real pastoral appeal and captures something true about moral accountability. However, it struggles with the text's own internal grammar: in verse 3, before Moses has appeared before Pharaoh in this section, Yahweh says “I will harden Pharaoh's heart” as a prospective declaration — not as a retrospective description of what Pharaoh has done. The text does not present hardening as consequence; it presents it as design. *Qualify* — this reading rightly protects moral accountability, but it imposes a sequence the text does not warrant.

The Lutheran reading tends to treat the hardening through the Law/Gospel lens — the Law hardens what will not bend; the Gospel softens what is opened by grace. This is theologically coherent but reads categories into Exodus 7 that are more properly Pauline. The text's own concern is not Law/Gospel but Yahweh's self-disclosure to Egypt and Israel alike. *Acknowledge* — the Law/Gospel framework is illuminating at the canonical level (Romans 9 explicitly engages these Exodus texts) but should not displace the text's own categories of display and glory.

The Reformed reading receives the text on its own terms: Yahweh's hardening of Pharaoh is an act of sovereign governance, not merely foreknowledge or permission. The purpose stated in the text itself is explicitly theocentric — “that I may multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt” (v. 3) and “that the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD” (v. 5). Paul's engagement with this exact text in Romans 9:14–18 confirms the Reformed reading: the hardening of Pharaoh is the paradigm case for divine sovereignty in election and reprobation, not a case study in human psychological deterioration. This does not dissolve Pharaoh's moral agency — the text presents both simultaneously without resolution — but it refuses to let human agency be the explanatory category. Yahweh's purpose is the governing logic. *The Reformed reading is preferred* because it alone takes the text's stated purpose seriously without importing prior commitments about what God “must” mean by this.

The magicians' replication of signs

A secondary interpretive question is how to understand the magicians' ability to replicate the serpent and the blood (vv. 11–12, 22). Some traditions (particularly those skeptical of supernatural phenomena) read the magicians as practicing sophisticated deception — sleight of hand. Others read their power as genuinely demonic. The text does not resolve

this question and does not seem interested in it. What the text highlights is the limits of the magicians' power (Aaron's serpent swallows theirs; later, they cannot replicate the gnats) and the futility of any power that stands against Yahweh's. Exposition should not spend energy on what the text does not spend energy on — the point is not the magicians' mechanism but their defeat. *No significant Reformed divergence here*; this is a case of appropriate exegetical restraint.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 9:14–18** — Paul quotes Exodus 9:16 (“I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you”) and draws the explicit conclusion: God hardens whom He will. This is the New Testament's own hermeneutical key to the Exodus hardening texts. The Reformed reading is not a later imposition — it is the apostolic reading.
- **Exodus 9:16 / Romans 9:17** — The later plague narrative makes Yahweh's stated purpose explicit: Pharaoh's existence in this role is itself an act of divine sovereign placement for the purpose of display. The Exodus 7 commissioning must be read in light of this later declaration.
- **John 11:4** — Jesus' statement that Lazarus's illness “is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it” — a New Testament instance of the same pattern: suffering and apparent defeat serving a disclosure of God that could not be achieved by any other means.
- **Isaiah 43:11–13** — Yahweh's self-declaration: “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me...that you may know and believe me.” The knowing-Yahweh motif that drives Exodus 7 is grounded in Yahweh's singular, exclusive identity.
- **Ephesians 1:11** — “He works all things according to the counsel of his will” — the New Testament's broadest canonical statement of the sovereign governance that Exodus 7 displays in concentrated, historical form.

Aim: To demonstrate that God's sovereignty over hard-hearted resistance is not a theological problem to be explained but a reality to be trusted — and that the Exodus 7 commissioning and opening plagues are the ground of that trust, not its occasion for embarrassment.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Yahweh reframes the relationship: Moses as “god” to Pharaoh, Aaron as prophet. Aaron will speak; Moses will command.	The prophetic/authority structure is now formally established. Moses’ sense of inadequacy (ch. 4–6) is answered not by changing Moses but by structuring the mission.
3–5	Yahweh announces He will harden Pharaoh’s heart and multiply signs, so Egypt will know He is Yahweh when He brings Israel out.	The governing purpose is stated explicitly before a single plague falls: display, knowledge, identification of Yahweh. This is the theological key to the entire plague cycle.
6–7	Moses and Aaron obey; their ages (80 and 83) are recorded.	The age note is not incidental — it signals divine timing. These men have been in preparation for decades.
8–9	Yahweh instructs Moses and Aaron: when Pharaoh demands a sign, Aaron’s staff will become a serpent.	The staff/serpent motif echoes Exodus 4:2–5 — what authenticated Moses to Israel now authenticates the mission before Pharaoh.
10–12	Aaron’s staff becomes a serpent; Pharaoh’s magicians replicate the sign with their own staffs.	The confrontation is staged: Egypt’s power is not negligible. This is not a walkover but a demonstration.
13	Aaron’s serpent swallows the magicians’ serpents; Pharaoh’s heart is hardened — just as Yahweh said.	“Just as the LORD had said” — this phrase becomes a refrain. Every act of Pharaoh’s resistance is confirmation of Yahweh’s sovereign word, not contradiction of it.
14–18	Yahweh instructs Moses to confront Pharaoh at the Nile in the morning: announce	The Nile confrontation is high-stakes: the Nile was Egypt’s life-source and Hapy

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	the first plague — water to blood — as a consequence of Pharaoh’s refusal to let Israel go.	(the Nile god) a major deity. This is a direct assault on Egyptian religious identity.
19–21	Aaron stretches his staff over the waters of Egypt; all water turns to blood. Fish die; the Nile stinks; Egyptians cannot drink.	The scope is total — not one stretch of river but all waters: rivers, canals, ponds, all vessels of stone and wood. There is no exemption, no partial judgment.
22	Egypt’s magicians replicate the blood sign; Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he turns and goes home.	The magicians’ replication hardens rather than softens Pharaoh — he takes it as evidence that this is simply power-contest, not Yahweh. His turning away is contempt, not consideration.
23–25	Pharaoh turns away unmoved; Egyptians dig along the Nile for water; the plague continues for seven days.	Seven days of the plague underscores that this is not a momentary disruption. The duration is part of the weight. Yet Pharaoh does not relent.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	The Commissioning: God Appoints, God Announces, God Intends
2	8–13	The First Sign: The Staff That Swallows — and Pharaoh Unmoved
3	14–25	The First Plague: The Nile Becomes Blood — and Pharaoh Still Unmoved

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Yahweh commissions Moses, confronts Pharaoh, and begins His sovereign demonstration against Egypt.

Primary Claim: God does not merely respond to Pharaoh's hardness — He governs it, so that His power and name will be displayed beyond what simple compliance could ever achieve. The reader is called to rest in the absolute sovereignty of God even when — especially when — resistance seems to be winning.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what resistance means in your current situation. (*Mind/belief*) Pharaoh's hardness is not an obstacle to God's plan — it is part of it. If you are praying for a door to open, a relationship to soften, an institution to change, and nothing is moving, Exodus 7 does not promise that it will move on your timetable. It promises something more unsettling and more stabilizing: that even the hardness is under governance. The question is not "why is this person not changing?" but "what is God accomplishing through this resistance that compliance could not achieve?" Reframe resistance not as evidence of God's absence but as the specific environment in which He has chosen to demonstrate Himself.

2. Stop confusing delayed deliverance with defeated deliverance. (*Mind/belief*) Seven days. The Nile runs red for seven days and Pharaoh turns away unmoved. The plague has not failed — it has not yet run its full course, and neither has the plan. The reader who encounters prolonged hardship without visible resolution is not watching God's plan unravel; they are watching it unfold on a timeline they cannot yet read. The commissioning in Exodus 7:1–7 precedes the resolution by ten plagues and the crossing of the sea. Trust the commission before you see the resolution.

3. Let Yahweh's self-identification recalibrate your worship. (*Affections/worship*) The phrase driving Exodus 7 is not "let my people go" — it is "that they may know that I am the LORD" (v. 5). God is not primarily engineering an exit strategy for Israel; He is engineering a disclosure of Himself. The plagues are, at their root, an act of worship-formation — forcing a knowledge of Yahweh where no such knowledge exists. Ask yourself honestly: what is your functional view of God in difficulty? Is He the One who exists to secure your outcomes, or is He the LORD whose self-disclosure is the point of the entire story, including your chapter of it?

4. Obey within your specific role and stop envying another's. (*Will/behavior*) Moses speaks to Yahweh; Aaron speaks to Pharaoh; the staff moves in Aaron's hand. The mission is structured — each person has a specific function and no one person carries the whole. Moses' role is not Aaron's; Aaron's is not Moses'. Pharaoh's court would not have been any more impressed by Moses speaking directly than by Aaron. The divine structure is not a

concession to Moses' weakness — it is the form the mission takes. Stop trying to occupy another person's role in the work God has given you. Do what you have been assigned, and trust that what you cannot do is assigned to someone else.

5. Grieve the hardness of those who turn away from clear demonstration.

(Affections/worship) Pharaoh turns away — goes home — after his magicians replicate the blood (v. 23). He is not troubled; he is not searching; he goes home. There is something devastating in that image, and the reader who has watched someone they love turn away from clear evidence of God's reality knows the weight of it. Do not simply analyze the hardening theologically — feel its tragedy. Pharaoh's turning away is not a triumphant moment in a theological argument; it is a portrait of a man marching toward destruction one dismissal at a time. Let that grieve you, and let it produce prayer for those in your life who are similarly turning away.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 7 establishes a theological foundation that undergirds the entire Exodus narrative and, by extension, the biblical theology of divine sovereignty: Yahweh does not merely permit resistance — He governs it for His own purposes of self-disclosure. The repeated formula “just as the LORD had said” (vv. 13, 22) is not retrospective commentary; it is a theological claim that Pharaoh's most defiant acts fall within Yahweh's declared intention. This means that the “knowledge of Yahweh” — the epistemic goal of the plagues stated in verse 5 — cannot be achieved by any other route than the one taken: prolonged, escalating, total demonstration against the world's most powerful sovereign. The chapter also establishes that Yahweh's power is not merely superior to Egypt's religious and political power; it is categorically different — it swallows opposition rather than competing with it (v. 12). God's character as the self-disclosing LORD who acts in history for the knowledge of His name is the theological spine of this chapter.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 7 is the historical ground for the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election and its corollary, divine reprobation — not as abstract decree but as concrete historical action. Paul's use of this exact material in Romans 9:14–18 is not a creative theological deployment of Old Testament narrative; it is the apostolic identification of what Exodus 7 was always about. The Reformed tradition reads Paul reading Exodus correctly: God's hardening of Pharaoh is the paradigm case for the sovereignty of grace, demonstrating that human destiny is not determined by human response but by divine purpose. This does not produce fatalism — Moses and Aaron obey, the plagues proceed, Israel is led out — but it means that the ground of confidence is never human cooperation with the divine plan. It is Yahweh's commitment to His own name and

His own purpose. The gospel does the same work: redemption is accomplished not when the human heart softens but when God acts decisively in history to accomplish what no human compliance could achieve. Exodus 7 is, in this sense, a prefiguration of the cross — the place where God achieves His supreme purpose of self-disclosure precisely through the supreme act of human resistance.

Main Takeaway

God is not surprised by the hardened heart in front of you — He announced it before it happened, and He is accomplishing through it what no easy compliance could achieve. The same sovereign who said “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” and then swallowed Egypt’s best powers with a staff is the God who governs every resistance you are watching right now. Stop counting the days the Nile runs red and start trusting the One who turned it red on purpose.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as a theological embarrassment to be minimized.** The most common homiletical failure with Exodus 7 is to spend so much energy softening the doctrine of divine hardening — rushing to Pharaoh’s free will, or to the Arminian “responsive hardening” reading — that the text’s own bold declaration is never actually preached. The text does not apologize for divine sovereignty over Pharaoh’s heart. The preacher should not either. Paul doesn’t (Romans 9); the preacher must not. Engage it honestly, with appropriate pastoral care for the questions it raises, but do not bury the claim.
- **Making the sermon primarily about Moses or Aaron rather than Yahweh.** Exodus 7 is not a leadership case study. Moses and Aaron are instruments — important, obedient, specifically assigned instruments — but the theological agent of every action is Yahweh. Sermons that use the commissioning section to preach about calling, courage, or overcoming inadequacy have read Moses back into the center of a text where Yahweh is the center. The ages of Moses and Aaron are noted to mark divine timing, not human biography.
- **Preaching the plagues without the stated purpose.** Verses 3–5 are the interpretive key to everything that follows in the plague cycle. Preach those verses or the plagues become a series of interesting natural events. The point is not the mechanism of the plagues but their declared function: “that the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.” Every individual plague, including the Nile turning to blood, must be preached in light of this stated purpose, or the exposition has missed the text’s own argument.

- **Treating Pharaoh's hardness as simply moral failure without theological density.** Pharaoh is morally culpable — Scripture treats him as such. But Pharaoh's hardness is not primarily a character study in stubbornness or pride. It is a theological event with a declared divine purpose. To preach Pharaoh merely as a cautionary tale about what happens when you refuse God is to moralize a text that is doing much more than moralize. The cautionary dimension is real, but it must be grounded in the theological purpose the text declares, not derived from it as a secondary lesson.
- **Skipping the Nile as a religious confrontation.** The first plague is not simply a water-quality disaster — it is a direct assault on one of Egypt's primary deities. The Nile was Hapy; it was Egypt's source of life, fertility, and religious confidence. Turning the Nile to blood is an act of theological warfare, not merely a natural plague. Exposition that misses this loses the force of the confrontation and flattens it into a story about water. The plagues are, in their structure, a systematic deconstruction of the Egyptian pantheon — Exodus 7 begins that deconstruction at the most foundational level.
- **Resolving the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility too quickly.** The text holds both without resolution: Yahweh hardens Pharaoh's heart (v. 3), and Pharaoh turns and goes home (v. 23) as a morally responsible agent. The preacher who rushes to resolve this tension — in either direction — has served a theological system rather than the text. Hold both. Name both. Trust that the congregation can live with a tension that Scripture itself lives with, and that the resolution is not the point of the text.