

RUF Bible Study – The Book of Exodus  
Doug Serven, RUF Campus Minister<sup>1</sup>  
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Exodus 7-10 – Plagues

One book that has been important to me is Judith Wallerstein's *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*. She studied the same group of people, following and tracking them for 25 years after their parents were divorced to find out what effects that event had on their lives. Most people in the time when no-fault divorce became legal in California in 1969 thought the new liberal divorce laws would be a great thing for our society. They operated under the assumption that if the parents are happy, then the children would be happy. Parents aren't happy in a bad marriage. Thus, if they get out, then they will be happier people and the children will benefit from this new-found freedom and goodness.

Not true, says Wallerstein. That is the first great divorce myth. Children are mostly oblivious to their parents' unhappiness. They never want their parents to get divorced. This may seem obvious to us now, some 40 years after the divorce revolution, but to the proponents and participants in easy divorce, it isn't and wasn't at all.

But there is a second myth that Wallerstein uncovers, again to her surprise. Most people thought, and still think, that the children will do fine after the initial rancor blows over. Thus, the divorce-experience is a short-term event in the lives of the children.

Again, not true. Wallerstein shows the life-lasting impact of divorce on the children well into adulthood. She says that the true import of the divorce isn't fully seen until the children themselves have grown up and are then looking for, wondering about, contemplating and entering into marriage themselves.

What has happened is that their story has changed. Their parents, the rocks of their lives, decided to no longer be together. Usually this is accompanied with intense anger, custody squabbles, two sets of homes, friends, gifts, and even two distinct lives. At the root of his or her psyche, the child of divorce wonders if anything can be trusted, anything is permanent, if the next fight will be the one that pushes out the spouse, and the inevitability of two people breaking up.

My wife's parents divorced when she was twelve. I think it took ten years before she *really* trusted that I wasn't going to leave her. That is a story that needs changing.

How can that change?

That's why we're looking at Exodus. It is the story of our salvation, and we need to hear it over and over. We have been told other stories. We've lived others stories. But what of the story of rescue, of salvation, of deliverance? As Eugene Peterson writes, "We need to recover the *story* if the salvation *words* are to mean anything. Salvation is not a one-night stand. It cannot be isolated from the thick texture of history; it is all-encompassing, pulling everything that has happened and happens, and every person named and unnamed, into relationship with the work of God in history."<sup>2</sup>

So we look at the plagues then as a part of the story of redemption. There is much to say, so we'll give an overview, attempting to make points of interest along the way, but staying away from getting lost in the details.

### *Moses' faltering lips*<sup>3</sup>

We first remind ourselves of the context. God's people are not doing well. They are in slavery. This is a bad time in the history of Israel. What can God's people do to save themselves? Absolutely nothing. They are stuck, hopeless, down and out, forgotten.

Exodus begins with Israel at its darkest moment. This "means that our classic story of salvation does not build on anything that we have done or can do either as individuals or societies. It is initiated in conditions of human impossibility, all odds stacked against it. We are blocked from going into a huddle and calculating our chances. At that historical dead end our imaginations, unencumbered with social, political and therapeutic strategies, are free to pay attention to God."<sup>4</sup>

Here enters the heroes of the story. Moses and Aaron. But we've mentioned that they are more like anti-heroes. After all, Moses seemingly threw it all away when he took matters into his own hands and killed the Egyptian slave driver in chapter

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**Please include the following statement on any distributed copy:** By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2007, website: [www.ouruf.org](http://www.ouruf.org). For this series, I used commentaries on Exodus from Cole, Ryken, Childs, Pink, Cassuto, Motyer and Currid, as well *A House for My Name* by Leithart, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* by Alexander, and *The Gospel According to Moses* by A Dickson. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller and Les Newsom. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

<sup>2</sup> Christ Plays, 147

<sup>3</sup> This outline is from one of the chapters of Ryken's commentary, but I have adapted it to cover a wider scope.

<sup>4</sup> Christ Plays, 149

2. He was in the wilderness for forty years. He is 80 years old. Do you know many 80-year-olds? How do they strike you? As revolutionaries? My grandfather is in his eighties and he can barely walk. He's way past senior citizen status. He's retired. He's not looking for any causes to fight that I know of. And Aaron is Moses' *older* brother.

These are two unlikely candidates. Against the king of Egypt we have – an old, decrepit shepherd slave leader.

Indeed, “Moses and Aaron come from the margins of society. They are outsiders and the narrative enforces that position. They are ill equipped to be leaders. They are unlikely candidates to be revolutionaries.

“But maybe that is the point. Salvation is God's work: Jesus saves. Incompetence may be the essential qualification, lest we impatiently and presumptuously take over the business and start managing a vast and intricate economy that we have no way of comprehending. To be sure, we get intimations; we are in touch with stories that reveal God's salvation work at certain moments in history to which we have access. We know enough to get in on the life of salvation personally by repenting and believing and following Jesus, the architect and pioneer of salvation. But when all is said and done, we don't know very much. Most of what goes on in salvation is beyond us; we live a mystery.”<sup>5</sup>

Ah, as Peterson says, perhaps Moses' inadequacy is just the point. Moses thinks so. In Exodus 6:30, we read: “*But Moses argued with the Lord, saying, “I can't do it! I'm such a clumsy speaker! Why should Pharaoh listen to me?”*” He isn't able. God is able. And when God calls, he supplies. Thus, Moses' job isn't to save the people, but to communicate the message of God's salvation. He's a preacher, and he does what a preacher does. That is the church's job, and as ineffective as it might seem, God communicates through messengers.

### ***Pharaoh's hard heart***

Let's turn our attention to Pharaoh. You're probably more interested in him anyway. I want you to remember something important. This passage and all of the plagues are answering a question. The question is Pharaoh's own question: Who is the Lord that I should obey him? We talked about how Pharaoh isn't an atheist. No one was an atheist. He's a polytheist. He has his God's, and he doesn't want to give them up. Why should he?

This plague episode is the answer. But you have reason to pause. You're reading along, and you realize that the text says Pharaoh made his own heart hard and also that God made Pharaoh's heart hard. *7:3 But I will make Pharaoh's heart stubborn so I can multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, 7:22 So Pharaoh's heart remained hard. He refused to listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had predicted.*

You might be interested in this. It is a perplexing philosophical question. Is God sovereign? Does Pharaoh have free will? How do these work together? You expect me to answer this.

You might hate this. It is preposterous, this Bible that says that God himself hardens peoples hearts. This God who sends terrible plagues on people. You expect me to defend this Yahweh.

Let me say a few things.

God does not make Pharaoh evil. Pharaoh is evil in and of himself. God hardens Pharaoh's heart by giving him over to his sin. Pharaoh is responsible for his condition. God is not hardening a good person. Pharaoh ruled over a dominion of death. In the Bible, Egypt is synonymous with death. The key symbol of the Egyptian culture, the symbol that stands even today is the pyramid, which is a huge, glorious, people-killing tomb.

In addition, Pharaoh is hardening himself. He doesn't want to know Yahweh. Never has. God isn't keeping him from something he wants to do. “Pharaoh has no claim on God's mercy, for he has sinned willfully and maliciously. He is no innocent bystander, but a willing, desiring compatriot of sin and vileness.”<sup>6</sup>

The bottom line is that Pharaoh wasn't going to listen to Moses. And he didn't. His heart was hard. At one point, Pharaoh looks like he's getting it. But he only wants the pain to stop and then he forgets.

The Bible communicates to you that God is sovereign even over the heart.

There you have it. God is sovereign. You are responsible. Do you want me to explain how that works?

Okay, I can't. It is too complicated for my mind. There is something that God knows about that I don't. I don't find that fact too hard to believe. Actually, I find it just like what a God would be like. If I understood everything about God and his ways, then he wouldn't be much of a god then would he? If you understand everything about your god, then I submit that your god is small, a paper god, never able to surprise or mystify you. That kind of god cannot help you. That kind of god cannot save you.

We're going to come back to why maybe Pharaoh missed what seems like would be obvious to us. But what is the message of the plagues for you?

Don't harden your heart. You do not want to be like Pharaoh. Know Yahweh. Turn to him. Do not wait. You are never guaranteed a future repentance. The day is now.

Do you have a hard heart? You do hate God? Do you reject God's ways in your life? Turn away and turn to God. We'll return to this issue as we look at God's answer and actions that follow.

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<sup>5</sup> Christ Plays, 152

<sup>6</sup> Currid, 155

### ***God's mighty hand***

In Exodus 7:4-5 we read: *Even then Pharaoh will refuse to listen to you. So I will bring down my fist on Egypt. Then I will rescue my forces—my people, the Israelites—from the land of Egypt with great acts of judgment. 5 When I raise my powerful hand and bring out the Israelites, the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.*"

This is a long point, so stay with me. There is a lot to say here, and by choosing to put all of the plagues together, I'm forced to summarize. We're looking at the answer to Who is the Lord?, Pharaoh's question about God. The plagues tell us that Yahweh is. When he raises his mighty hand, everyone will know that he is Yahweh.

In this way, God's plagues are judgment and evangelistic. In face, in 9:20 we see that even some of the Egyptians came to believe in the words of God and acted upon them.

They are natural, an exorcism and prove him to be unique above all other gods.

What we have with the snakes is the paradigm for the rest of what comes. From the serpent to the upcoming miracle at the Red Sea, the key word is "swallow." God will swallow up all other gods. He will swallow up evil. He will take it, and prove himself to be bigger and more powerful than anything else in the universe.

What we have here is a war between the God of the Hebrews and the deities of Egypt. This is a grudge match. A rivalry. The Super Bowl and the trophy is the answer of Who is the true God?

This is why the opening shot takes place with the serpents in Pharaoh's court. The snake was a symbol for Egypt, one of power, divinity and majesty. This would be like taking a bald eagle into the White House and ringing its neck in front of the president.

Aaron's staff is able to turn from a snake and back again. The magicians can do the same thing. We don't exactly know how, for the text doesn't tell us, but they could be snake charmers, it could have been magic or there really could be the power to do this, for we believe there is a real Satan and he is really able to do supernatural things. Regardless, false gods do have a power. But it's the power to corrupt God's creation. Never to create himself.

So we have Aaron's rod snake. And the Pharaoh's magicians' snakes. What happens? God's snake gobbles up the others. They get swallowed.

According to commentator Umberto Cassuto, this shows:

Moses is showing to the Israelites that:

1. He is not inferior to the Egyptian enchanters who knew how to charm snakes and make them as motionless as a rod, and afterwards change them back to their normal vitality, but that he is able to perform the opposite processes, which are even more amazing.
2. That he has the power to achieve marvels comparable to those attributed by the Egyptians to their greatest magicians, as in the Egyptian story that relates of a famous sorcerer who made a sea-monster of wax and cast it out into the water, where it became alive, until the magicians took hold of it with his hand and it became a waxen model again.
3. That, with the help of God, he is able to put forth his hand and take hold of the tail of the serpent without fear (as a rule, snakes are held by their necks to prevent them from biting), and thus he would show how great is his trust in his God, and he would make his brethren as courageous as himself."<sup>7</sup>

This is the prelude to the plagues, as God takes Pharaoh's power and proves it to be impotent, inert, and unsaving. Let's summarize what happens next, what spans a few chapters of Israel's salvation history and therefore yours and mine as well.

### ***Plagues are normal, natural.***

The first thing we notice is that these plagues are a little odd. The snake thing is very cool. Nice. But after that, we have what we might consider fairly unspectacular events. These things had happened to Egypt before, and they surely would happen again. Granted, they didn't normally happen when someone said they would, or as a result of someone's command, but these are natural events.

Think about it this way, a way that perhaps makes more sense to our big-screen, blockbuster minds:<sup>8</sup> Moses could have walked into Pharaoh's court and said, "Let my people go that they may worship Yahweh." He did do that. Pharaoh could have said "Who is Yahweh that I should obey him?" He did say that. Then, and this would have been cool, Moses could have pointed his staff and started turning people into barnyard animals. Pow! A pig. Zow! A cow. Zing! A newt! Pharaoh, you're next – no? – okay Wham! You're a ball of fire!

Pharaoh cringes at this utter display of supernaturalness and falls to his knees.

Wouldn't that have been more effective? What is God saying by the way he does things?

Commentators all say that what we have here is the reversal of creation. He used the culture and what was around him to show that disobedience brings about a natural destruction and disintegration. The plagues are the undoing of creation. God made darkness light and now he is undoing it, going from order to chaos, light to darkness.

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<sup>7</sup> Cassuto, 46-47

<sup>8</sup> I'm thinking about it this way because of a Keller sermon.

Start at the beginning. The Nile river turns to something like blood.<sup>9</sup> We don't know if it was blood or looked like blood, but it was bad and made it unhealthy. Might have been blood. Might have looked like blood, as this happened from time to time – fungi get stirred up so the water looks red. “Similarly, the other plagues are also not actual deviations from nature, but brought about by the natural phenomenon at the opportune moment and on an unusually large scale, until it becomes evident that they have a specific significance.”<sup>10</sup>

The Nile was a god to the Egyptians. They worshiped it. And here it is attacked. It's interesting to see that the Egyptian magicians' magic make their own situation worse. They aren't helping themselves.

Because of the river problems, frogs come out and go everywhere. Ew. The frogs die everywhere and because of their rotting bodies, gnats and flies swarm. This affects the livestock, which starts dying. There is an epidemic going on here. Because of the disease, the flies and the death all around, peoples' skin break out. Then a hail storm destroys the crops and locusts come in and eat the rest. Finally, the penultimate plague is darkness. Brooding, inky black darkness covers the land.

Darkness represents chaos. Bad things happen in the dark. In creation, the universe was dark and chaotic, but God brought about light and order.

God brings about plagues that are natural consequences of our disobedience. Natural in the sense as things you have seen before, the way in which the world works. Things go wrong when you disobey God. This is easy to miss. These natural consequence judgments are easy to dismiss.

But you need to understand that God created you, and he created everything. There is a manufacturer or designer's guarantee that things will work if you use them correctly. If you do things wrong, they won't work.

What am I saying?<sup>11</sup> If you make friendship your god, you won't have any friends. Your expectations will not be able to support it. God says that you are to be a forgiven and therefore a forgiving person. If you refuse to forgive, then you will become bitter, angry, and lost.

There are natural consequences all around us, and they are so easy to miss. Do you know about OU freshman Blake Hammontree. Hammontree, 19, was found dead Sept. 30, 2004 in a fraternity house and his blood-alcohol content was .42, more than five times the legal limit for intoxication. Do you realize how hard that is to do? What had to happen is that – after he was already passed out – the people with him, presumably his fraternity brothers had to keep pouring alcohol down his throat. I'm guessing they were laughing all the way, drunk.

I think that it's okay to drink in moderation if you are over 21. But it is over-drinking and binge drinking that is a plague on our campus. Do you realize how many times alcohol is involved in rape?

What about pornography? It's killing our men. But it seems so natural, so easy, so private. Actually, it is sending out waves of destruction and disintegration in your life and the lives of others, including your girlfriend, your future wife, your kids. I have a friend who walked into his roommate's room, and there his roommate stood with semen all around him. He'd been watching porn for seven hours.

Wake up! Don't have a hard heart! There are consequences to going against God's creation. The Bible is telling you that obeying God, living according to his ways and commandments is natural. It is good for you.

Let me put it another way.<sup>12</sup> Imagine you are 55 years old and in the hospital. Your doctor tells you that if you don't stop eating the wrong foods that you will die soon. Your cholesterol is too high. Do you turn to her and say, “If I don't are you going to have me arrested?” Do you say, “Hey, lady, don't boss me around.” No, that is what two-year-olds say. As a rational person that wouldn't enter your mind. She is telling you that if you go against the way your body is made, that you will harm yourself. It will be the natural course of events.

Are you tired of destroying yourself yet? Or, are you ready to be what you were created to be? I met with a student last semester who told me he was just plain tired of the whole party scene game. Every day he woke up with a hangover with a different woman in his bed. He'd get up and think about what woman he was going to sleep with that night and how he was going to meet her and get her into bed.

Is that a good life? Aren't you tired of a conversation that goes, “Oh man, I got so effed up last night. I'm going to get effed up tonight!”

Wake up. This passage is telling you that there are plagues all around us. Puddles of puke on Campus Corner. Condoms in the bathroom in the dorms. Don't harden your heart. These are so natural that it's easy to miss them. Pharaoh missed them. There is a point, it's a 8:19, where it looks like the magicians are getting it, when they realize they can't replicate

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<sup>9</sup> We should not think that the water of the river actually became blood. What is meant is that it turned red. In Joel 2:31 the prophet speaks of the sun turning to darkness and the moon to blood. It is a figurative way of speaking of something turning red. In itself there is nothing unusual in this, for, as we said, the Nile carries a great deal of red earth downstream from the highlands hundreds of miles to the south and also can be turned red by large quantities of minute fungi. This time the effect was heightened, not only by an unusual amount of rainfall to the south and so an unusually high volume of water carrying an unusually large amount of silt, but as well by various organisms and bacteria that poisoned the fish. This plague and the next two serve as a softening-up of Egypt for the hammer blows that are still to fall. These first three represent a major nuisance but little more. [Ellison, 45]

<sup>10</sup> Cassuto, 98

<sup>11</sup> These applications are a mix of some of my own and some from other places.

<sup>12</sup> Keller

the plagues. “This is the finger of God,” they say. That’s close but not right. This is the mighty hand of God. Just because you’ve seen these things before doesn’t mean they aren’t miracles and plagues. They are signs for you to repent and believe. Turn back from your hard heart today. These are ignorable. Don’t ignore them.

### ***Plagues are exorcism.***

But there’s more. For while we notice that the plagues are natural, we also see that they seem to take awhile. Why isn’t there an instantaneous one big plague? Or why not skip directly to the last one? Why so many?

Eugene Peterson in his incredible book *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places* says that it’s because the plagues are not only judgment for Egypt, but they perform an exorcism for Israel. Okay.

In thinking about that, I went and rented the “Exorcism” movie. It was scary in 1973 when it came out, but for our modern viewing it - was - just - slow. Intense, yes, but in a slow, intense way. There is a 12-year-old girl who “contracts” a demon. No one knows what to do. No one believes in the demonic, or even considers it. Not the doctors, the psychologists, or even the church. Other explanations are possible. It must have a natural cause. It starts to sound like they’re going to do a frontal lobotomy.

The mom says “Come see.” And they still try to insist that there must be a medical explanation for this. You find out that exorcism is slow, powerful, long, intense. And that the girl is just there, she is “done to,” not doing. And it works.

God’s people needed an exorcism. Peterson: “The Hebrews had suffered long and much, an oppression underwritten by a most impressive religion – all those temples and statues and priests! Everywhere they looked they could see that not only were the Egyptians against them, the *gods* were against them.”<sup>13</sup>

They couldn’t imagine anything else, any other system. “If Moses led them out of Egypt with their imaginations still controlled by Egypt, it wouldn’t be long before they would be repeating the ‘way of Egyptian success’ themselves. As far as they knew, this is what worked, and had worked for at least a thousand years. If their imaginations were not thoroughly cleansed from the evil they were immersed in, they would end up doing the same thing as soon as they were in power themselves, oppressing the weak and trampling on the helpless, bullying those under them with might and size in the name of whatever gods there were.”<sup>14</sup>

“The exorcism dram of the ten plagues freed the Hebrews from this Egyptian way of understanding reality, clearing the mind to accept God’s revelation of reality, energizing their spirits to live in the world of salvation. The intent was that by the time they left Egypt, they would not only be physically free of the evil oppression but mentally free of the evil imagination that had crushed the life out of them for so long. The ten plagues would cleanse the ‘doors of perception’ so that Israel could see life in a totally different way – the unreality of Egypt exposed: the untruth of Egypt laid bare – and would set them free to live a different life when they get out of Egypt, free to live the freedom of salvation.”<sup>15</sup>

Egypt was considered so great and powerful. Egypt with all of its history, its pyramids, its panoply of gods, it’s power over the people, the Nile, the great and mighty Pharaoh. All of that is ignored by the Bible writers. The Bible stands and says, in spite of all the evidence, I will show you that God is sovereign. And “Each plague, relentless, inexorable, crashed into the pretensions of Egyptian sovereignty, blow by blow by blow.”<sup>16</sup>

What we have here is that Israel’s allegiances must be changed. It cannot be allowed to be double-minded, but must see that God is sovereign and there is a transfer from one old, evil sovereign to another. This is a freeing from the grip of the demonic.

All of us need this sort of deliverance, this sort of exorcism. It’s strange to think of it this way, isn’t it. But you have been told lies all these years. You have listened. There is a story about your life, your body, your feelings, your clothes, your grades, your achievements that you have been told and that you believe.

God says you need to transfer your allegiance to him. He is Yahweh over your computer, your breasts, your brain, your time. And he is good. He is the creator after all. He is the King. He says you are his children.

This connects with the culture of divorce. If your parents were divorced, then how can you be freed from that story? You realize the statistics say that people who were physically and/or sexually abused WILL physically and/or sexually abuse others, right? Why is that? Wouldn’t they be the last people who would want to inflict that pain on others?

There is a hold of evil on their lives. There is a story that is controlling their lives, one that is very difficult to get rid of. I’m sorry, but saying, “I forgive him,” and then ignoring it is not enough. You need to be released from that bondage, and that takes time and is an intense thing. You need to slowly see the gods of this world come down, and see God and his ways rise up. You need to spend time around someone else who lives a different story. You need to park yourself at the house of a husband and wife who love each other but still fight sometimes so you can see them work it out. You need to talk to a

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<sup>13</sup> Christ Plays, 161

<sup>14</sup> Christ Plays, 162

<sup>15</sup> Christ Plays, 163

<sup>16</sup> Christ Plays, 164

counselor about the confusion and disintegration in your life. You need to cry a lot. Feel the hurt. You need to be released. You need to be freed.

***God is unique.***

The last thing we see with this whole story, this story of redemption that we so desperately need. God answers Pharaoh's over-arching question of "Who is this Yahweh?" with an answer that he is a god like no other. He is God. Unique. Why is this? What's the big deal?

Let's say a few things.<sup>17</sup> God is unique because the plagues salvation activities. They save the Hebrews, which is obvious. But they also save some of the Egyptians who start to take notice. And they save us, and the millions of people who have read and understood this message. Did you notice how it seems that God "pulls his punches" in the text. He tells the people to bring in their livestock so they won't be destroyed. If the purpose is judgment, why would he want the most destruction possible?

The purpose isn't judgment. It's salvation. You see, the Bible isn't about judgment. It's about the Judge who is judged.

You see, thousands of years later, there was a man who did miracles when asked for a sign. They were weird miracles though. He didn't turn people into stone or make cool water people. He reversed the destruction of nature. He healed people. He fed people. He was integrating things.

And when he died, do you remember, have you heard about what happened? The sky turned to darkness. Why?

Jesus Christ of Nazareth wasn't just the judge. Yes, he is that. He will come someday to judge the quick and the dead. We all say that in the Apostles' Creed. Jesus was also judged. On the cross, he took the plagues for you. He took the all the disintegration, all the destruction done to God's creation, everything onto him so that you could be saved, released and set free.

Jesus took the plagues on him on the cross. All of them. He *swallowed up* evil on the cross, and even conquered death, shown by raising *himself* from the dead. In 1 Cor. 15 we read "*Death has been swallowed up in victory.*"

No other god is like this. No other religion comes close. All others tell you have to do things to be saved. Even Buddhism, which people seem to be attracted to, tells you that if you aren't compassionate enough, then you will go back into the cycle of reincarnation for another go around. It's essentially works.

Christianity is too. But it is based on the works of another. What did the Hebrews do to be saved? Nothing.

Do you want a sign like Pharaoh did? Have you ever asked for God to show himself to you? Look to the cross. See the man. Yes, people died on crosses all the time. There were tens of thousands of crucifixions. Jesus didn't die a spectacular death. It was painful. It was shameful. You could miss it. Don't miss the plague of the cross. It is a sign, an answer for you. Look to him for salvation from slavery to worship by a redeemer.

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<sup>17</sup> Keller stuff follows. It's just so good.