

New series

Moses: earth's meekest man

1. Pharaoh's dilemma*

John Mitchell

In the opening article in this new series, the scene is set for the appearance of one of the greatest men of the Bible, Moses.

PHARAOH, king of Egypt, was on the horns of a dilemma.¹ His kingdom was protected by nature on three sides: the south and the west by the desert sands, the north by the Mediterranean Sea. Only on the eastern border, known as the land of Goshen, was it easily accessible to an invader, and only in that direction did there exist any power capable of mounting a challenge.

The snag, in the eyes of Pharaoh, was, however, that Goshen, the open gateway to his realm, was populated largely by a nation of foreigners called Hebrews, of whose loyalty in time of crisis he felt he could not be certain. These wanderers from the land of Canaan had been invited to live in the realm of Egypt some centuries before during a great famine, as a gesture of gratitude to one of their number, named Joseph. He, by inspiration of God, had not only foretold the famine but had also saved the land of Egypt and the whole of the eastern Mediterranean by the measures he took in storing up grain during the years of plenty that preceded the drought. This Pharaoh, however, "knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8, AV).²

Admitted as a people of only tribal proportions, the Hebrews had in the intervening generations become a nation of over two million souls, whose fecundity made them a menace to the Egyptians on that count alone. So Pharaoh hit on a plan that even Hitler would not have been ashamed of. First he would reduce the Hebrews to servitude, and would use their labour to build two magazine cities as strongholds on his weakest border, where they were living. "'Look', he said to his people, 'the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country'" (v. 9). And in this endeavour Pharaoh was helped by changes

that had occurred within the Hebrew community itself.

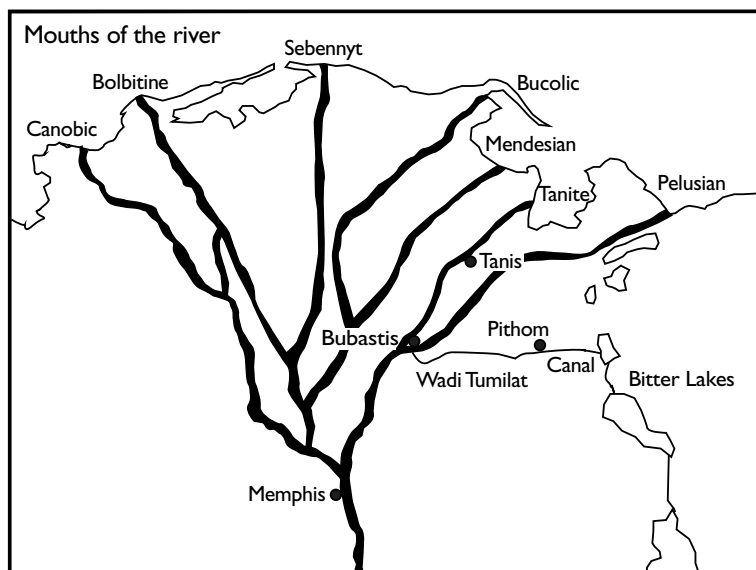
In the time of Joseph, and no doubt for many years afterwards, the Israelites had been cattlemen, moving around the grasslands on the eastern side of the delta of the Nile where the river emptied itself into the Mediterranean Sea, looking after, not only their own cattle and sheep, but those of the king also. Two of the twelve tribes especially seem to have stuck to this way of life, namely Reuben and Gad, who, when they arrived eventually in the Promised Land, put in a claim for the grasslands of Jazer and Gilead on the eastern side of the River Jordan because they were suitable for their very large herds and flocks (Num. 32:1-5).

Israel in Egypt

The nomadic life, however, appears to have lost some of its attractiveness for their fellows. Next to where the children of Israel were living, over to the west in the Nile delta, lay the arable country rendered richly fertile every year by the alluvial mud transported from central Africa by the great river. Its harvests, except when the floods failed, made Egypt the breadbasket of the nations to such an extent that even mighty Rome, when its

* Quotations from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

1. No attempt is made here to identify the Pharaoh concerned or the dynasty to which he belonged, as the experts themselves are sharply divided on the matter. Some idea of the alternatives, albeit with variations, may be gained by consulting *Speaker's Commentary*, *Ellicott's Commentary* and (for a more modern survey of the possibilities) the Watchtower Society's *Aid to Bible Understanding* (1971). Similar differences of view apply as to the actual length of stay of the children of Israel in Egypt.
2. Whether the phrase "knew not Joseph" is intended to mean that Pharaoh did not appreciate the honourable part Joseph had played in the history of Egypt, or whether it implies that it was politically expedient for him to forget all about the Hebrew saviour, is uncertain.



Map showing the Nile Delta area. Goshen is thought to have been in the Wadi Tumilat area.

turn came to rule, could not do without Egyptian wheat to enable it to carry out its 'bread and circuses' policy for keeping the idle poor happy. Small wonder, then, that the Israelites themselves were attracted to the easier life and the softer living in the delta as the years went by.

Moreover, it was not only for the produce from the land that they repined during their wilderness wanderings—the cucumbers and the melons, and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, as well as bread to the full—but also for the fish that they ate for nothing. The delta, with its five major outlets to the sea, was crisscrossed with canals for irrigation purposes that were so teeming with fish that very little effort was needed to catch them. It was a gourmet's paradise.

But there was a price to pay for all this luxurious living; socially, religiously and demographically. In Canaan, Jacob's children had been very much a race apart, having there no abiding city; and although, in the providence of God, they had been transported to Goshen for the protection they needed when growing into a nation, their absorption into a more Egyptian environment inevitably led to a commingling with them, and to a "mixed multitude" (Ex. 12:38, AV) in their midst.

In matters of religion the Israelites maintained their major rites and practices, such as circumcision (4:24-26), the keeping of the sabbath (20:8) and sacrificial offerings (8:25-28), but they became ambivalent in their worship and renewed a liaison with idolatry which their father Jacob hoped he

had buried once and for all beneath the oak at Shechem (Gen. 35:4). So, in their latter years in Egypt, the nation of Israel, as the people of God, were ripe for correction and repentance such as He in His providence was about to initiate through Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's evil schemes

In two strokes the king planned to deal with the Hebrews. The first was by using them to strengthen his border, and the second by curbing their long-term expansion in the cruelest possible way. As regards the first, the importance of Pharaoh's project to build two new cities as strongholds on the eastern side of the delta that would be permanently manned and stocked

with munitions of war was demonstrated by the names they were given: 'Pithom' (meaning 'house or temple of Tum', the sun god of Heliopolis) and 'Rameses' (the name of a district in the Delta connected with royalty).

It was a major scheme that would require millions of bricks and multitudes of labourers, which, fortunately in the eyes of Pharaoh, were now easily to hand. The building skills required presented no problem to a nation whose engineering feats in their pyramids and temples were, and still are, the wonder of the world, but unless there had been recent conquests slave labour would have been a problem. However, in the case of the Hebrews, there was no need to provide special encampments, nor even rations brought from afar; both were in situ, and the people could look after themselves. And as for the bricks, they could readily be made from the mud of the delta, fortified with chopped straw and dried in Egypt's perennial sunshine.

This meant, of course, that family life among the resident Hebrew population could be, and was, maintained, and the normal processes of procreation continued, which was hardly what Pharaoh had in mind: "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with hard labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labour the Egyptians used them ruthlessly"

The Ismaila Canal near Etl Maskhuta (ancient Succoth) in what was the land of Goshen in ancient times.



Deborah Hum

(Ex. 1:12-14), which was the reason for the king's second stroke. He sent for the two chief midwives (there must have been far more than two to service so great and widespread a population), and ordered them, "'When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live'. The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live" (vv. 16,17).

The narrative continues: "Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, 'Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?' The midwives answered Pharaoh, 'Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive'" (vv. 18,19), which implied, of course, that the babes were hidden elsewhere by the time the midwives came. Their story was an obvious subterfuge that could have brought down the wrath of the king upon their own heads. But it did not do so because Pharaoh had an even more draconian measure in mind. Nevertheless, Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives, were rewarded by God for their courageous stand, so that their own households prospered and the population of the Hebrews continued to grow.

Pharaoh's fury on account of this was shown by what he did next. He gave an order to all his people, "Every boy that is born you must throw into the river [Nile], but let every girl live" (v. 22). Just how the edict was expected to be carried out is not revealed. Was there a Gestapo-like organisation constantly probing the incidence of

pregnancies among the Hebrew women? And were their Egyptian neighbours expected to report on them when the time of their *accouchement* drew near?

And what happened when a child was sometimes spirited away to the home of a relative elsewhere? For it was too much to expect that a Hebrew woman who had nurtured the babe in herself and laboured for it would not try desperately to preserve it, especially if it was a male first child and the heir presumptive. Women of any nation do not give up their infants to the slaughter that easily. As the prophet Isaiah said, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" (49:15, AV). How many Hebrew boys survived Pharaoh's cruel order is not stated, nor how many ended up in the river, but the grief in the families that suffered must have been great.

There was one husband-and-wife pair, however (their names were Amram and Jochebed, and they were of the tribe of Levi), who, by inspiration of God, hit on a plan to outwit Pharaoh while at the same time not contravening the edict of the king that all male children should end up in the river. They already had two children, a boy and a girl who were well out of their infancy, and when Jochebed became pregnant again and was delivered of an especially fine child³ they determined to do everything in their power to save him. It

3. The attractiveness of the child is twice referred to in the New Testament, where he is referred to as "fair to God" (Acts 7:20, AV mg.; cf. Heb. 11:23).

was all in the purpose of God, of course, that they should do so, for He had a special purpose with the child to make him the greatest prophet next to the Lord Jesus Christ that the nation of Israel

would ever have. How Amram and Jochebed, in an astonishing act of faith (Heb. 11:23), accomplished their plan, as recorded by their illustrious son, will be our next consideration.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

Who is my neighbour?

Trevor Maher

It is well known that the Bible commands us to love our neighbour, but how do we carry that out? Bible teaching is that this is much more than responding to appeals for help, and involves our whole attitude to others, inside and outside the household, in particular bringing the gospel into people's lives.

THE EXPRESSION 'global village' is used today to describe the world we live in. Modern communications make it possible for news and information concerning events happening in far-flung corners of the world to be received, not just in hours or minutes, but almost instantaneously. In 1805 it took three weeks for the news of Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, and details of the casualties, to be brought to London. Now we can watch the effects of Hurricane Katrina unfolding before us on our televisions, and see the carnage wreaked by car bombs in Baghdad moments after they exploded.

No longer do we have the runner, fleet of foot, suffering from fatigue, or the rider needing fresh mounts. No longer do we hear the telegraph operator clicking away in Morse Code for another to translate the message and carry it by hand to the intended recipient. Through the lens of the camera, the click of the computer key and the marvels of satellite technology, countries that previously were just names on maps appear in our living rooms; we view their inhabitants stranded in floods, recovering from earthquakes, shot dead in the street, massed in political rallies in city squares, or ravaged by famine; and all of them demanding that we take notice.

It does not stop there. As you walk down your local High Street, earnest young people with their distinctive tops assail you with requests to sign up Direct Debits for "just a few pounds a month sir/madam—only thirty pence a day, surely you can afford that", to help children in Africa, or

Dr Barnardo's, or Eastern European orphans, or endangered species of animals.

"Let us not be weary in well doing"

Just how should the disciple of Christ react and respond to this avalanche of information, highlighting the desperate plight of this planet and those that live on it? The injunction of Scripture is quite clear: "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:9,10).

But are all those people suffering persecution or the traumas of natural disasters thousands of miles away our neighbours? Is there a limit to what we are expected to give? Can we draw a boundary line somewhere on the map and say thus far and no further? How should we divide the aid we give between brethren and sisters and the 'neighbour' in the world? We may think that for previous generations, and for those alive when these words of Scripture were penned, making decisions about 'doing good' was more simple than it is for us. They simply would not know about events beyond a certain distance, and helping neighbours would relate to those who lived in their immediate area. Nor did our forefathers have electronic banking systems able to transfer funds from bank cards or credit cards to aid organisations situated in different locations around the country or the world.

As a community we have a number of organisations that cater for those in need, both inside the household of faith and outside it. We have the Meal-A-Day Fund, the Samaritan Fund, Africrafts, CBM Welfare, CBM Project Aid, Christadelphian Save the Children, Christadelphian Care Homes, Jewish Clothing Relief, Shunem Home India, Leper Project India and others. Is giving money to these organisations fulfilling our responsibility to love our neighbour?