

Moses: earth's meekest man

7. The contest begins*

John Mitchell

After his initial plea to let Israel go had been rejected, Moses confronted Pharaoh with a second request, this time backed up by miracles. When even these did not convince Pharaoh, God commanded that the first of the ten plagues should be brought upon the land, the turning of the waters of the Nile into blood.

DISMAYED by the results of his first encounter with Pharaoh, Moses felt he could not face the tyrant again. On behalf of Yahweh the God of the Hebrews he had asked that the children of Israel should be granted leave from their labours to take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the Lord, sacrifices the Egyptians would not have countenanced in their midst because rams were sacred to their god Amon and oxen were the symbol of Osiris and Isis.

Pharaoh's peremptory refusal had been bad enough, but when he had followed it up with draconian measures to make the lot of the Hebrew slaves even worse, Moses complained to God that ever since he went to Pharaoh to speak in His name the king had brought trouble upon the children of Israel, and God had not rescued them at all. Moreover, Moses had suffered great humiliation at the hands of his own people, who had called upon God to judge him for bringing further misery upon them. Yahweh's latest instruction to Moses, that he should again visit Pharaoh to let the children of Israel go out of his country, had only served to revive Moses' feeling of inferiority regarding his powers to persuade anyone: "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?"

Reassurance for Moses

It has been comforting to many generations of believers to realise that, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust" (Ps. 103:13,14, AV). Moses needed reassurance, and he received it from the Lord. Moreover, with that reassurance came the first intimation that the issue between Yahweh

and the gods of Egypt, through His representatives and theirs, would not be summarily decided. It was to be spectacularly prolonged through the hardening of Pharaoh's heart until the total humiliation and defeat of Egypt should be achieved.

"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay My hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out My divisions, My people the Israelites. And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out My hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it'".

So the two octogenarian leaders of the children of Israel confronted Pharaoh again, and, when he asked them for proof of the power of Yahweh vested in themselves, they did as He had told them to do. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and thereby issued a challenge to the whole of the establishment of Egypt, gods and all. As Cunningham Geikie explains, "Like all the other 'signs' and plagues, that of the rod turned into a serpent was a direct challenge from Jehovah to all the idols of Egypt; for serpents were worshipped in various parts of the country, and the living symbol of the god of Pithom, a town of the Hebrew district, was one of these creatures".¹

Pharaoh, however, did not accept this sign of the superiority of the God of the Hebrews. He expected his wise men and sorcerers to be capable of similar things. He sent for them, no doubt informing them in advance of the challenge they were about to face so that they would come

* Scripture quotations taken from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

1. *Hours with the Bible*, Vol. 2, *From Moses to the Judges*, Fifth edition (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1882), p. 132.



Snake charmer's cobra in Sri Lanka

(Picture: © iStockphoto.com/Markus Seidel)

prepared. Just how many of them came, rod in hand, to perform their secret arts we are not told, nor how they achieved their sleight of hand, but it is known that conjurors in the East have from ancient times displayed extraordinary powers over snakes, even to the extent of catching them by the head and making them stiff and motionless, only to come to life again when thrown down.

Thus one can sense the superior sneer on the face of Pharaoh when his sorcerers did not disappoint him; but his smile must have vanished moments later when Aaron's rod swallowed up theirs, and the first round of the contest went decisively in Yahweh's favour. Moses and Aaron left the royal presence disappointed, and yet forewarned. Pharaoh's heart was hardened; he would not let the children of Israel go, either that day, or on the morrow, or for many days to come.

The first plague

How soon afterwards Yahweh spoke again to Moses is not revealed; it could have been next day or a few days later, simply being covered by the word 'then'. But the message was, "Pharaoh's heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the water. Wait on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. Then say to him, 'The LORD [Yahweh], the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let My people go, so that they may worship Me in the desert. But until now you have not listened. This is what the LORD [Yahweh] says: By this you will know that I am the LORD [Yahweh]: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed

into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water'".

The setting of this second sign, which became the first of the plagues of Egypt, was deliberately chosen to represent the greatest of all challenges to the gods of the land of the Pharaohs. The Nile was metaphorically the lifeblood of the realm and of its people, providing in its annual inundations a fresh layer of fertile soil in which to plant crops, and then the abundant water needed to make them grow. And so highly did the river rank in the superstitious estimation of the Egyptians, from Pharaoh on his throne down to the fellaheen who tilled the soil, that it was venerated in the persons of several gods, who were daily worshipped by Pharaoh himself. Hence Moses' morning visitation was ordained by God to coincide with the hour when the king went to worship his gods at the rising of the waters. It was obviously a highly ritualised occasion, and was attended by the king's counsellors, both religious and civil.

The sudden appearance of Moses and Aaron at a sacred spot on the banks of the river at such an hour could hardly have been welcome, especially as Moses carried in his hand the rod, that hated symbol of the power of Yahweh that had so recently humiliated the royal court. One assumes that the daily routine had not begun when Moses confronted Pharaoh, for he had been told to wait on the bank of the river until the king appeared. Such a meeting might have been regarded as dangerous by men of lesser faith, but Moses knew his God and, especially after the success of the first 'sign', had total confidence in Him. No obeisance, no act of deference is recorded; like Elijah before Ahab, a later troubler of Israel, Moses simply stood there, staff in hand, and delivered the message God had told him to give. It was ignored.

So, in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials, Moses told Aaron to take the staff and stretch it out over the waters of Egypt—over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs—and they would turn into blood. Even the water in wooden household containers and in the stone troughs at the corners of the streets would change. Beginning with the Nile itself, and in the presence of the king and his officials, Moses and Aaron did as the Lord had commanded. The water was changed into blood, the fish in the Nile died, leaving the Egyptians lacking their huge daily supply of food, and then the river itself stank abominably. Not only so, the waters

were rendered undrinkable, and the people were driven to the expedient of digging holes along the banks of the river into which water that had been filtered through the soil might flow and thus be made potable.

The magicians do likewise

Briefly, the Scripture then reports, “But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh’s heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said. Instead, he turned and went into his palace, and did not even take this to heart”. All of this raises many questions as to the nature of the “blood” that was inflicted upon the Egyptians.

is that real blood would have decayed in the heat of the sun even before the fish died, and it was they that stank with an effluvia that was unbearable.

So most commentators have looked for another explanation of the phenomenon; one consistent with the Nile itself. The sudden and abundant development of micro-organisms or of minute plant life, coloured red, that are poisonous to fishes has been suggested as the likeliest possibility. And the circumstances of the case would seem to enhance it. Evidently discoloration of the Nile and resultant fetidness were not unknown, and the condition gradually cleared with the flow of the river. This could be the reason why Pharaoh



A general view of the broad expanse of the River Nile

(Picture: © iStockphoto.com/
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Was it the kind of fluid that flows through the veins of man and beast, or some other concoction, or even an optical illusion? This last is easily disposed of, for there is no parallel here with the incident in the days of Elisha and King Jehoshaphat when, in the struggle against the Moabites, the latter looked across the flooded landscape as the sun shone on it, and assumed from its colour that it was blood, the blood of the Israelites. In that case there was no contamination of the water, only an optical illusion. But when Moses and Aaron smote the waters they were immediately highly polluted and rendered undrinkable.

As regards the possibility that the waters of the Nile were changed into real blood, as some commentators have argued, there are two facts that should be considered. The first is that the waters were made potable by filtration through the earth on the banks of the river, which could not have been done with blood. And the second

returned so summarily to his palace, would not listen to Moses and Aaron, and did not take the miracle to heart. Yet miracle it was because of the extent of it, even along the streams of the Delta and their tributary canals.

The king’s stance was further supported in his own eyes when his sorcerers, by some admixture or other, were able to turn a separate patch of clear water into the same appearance as the Nile; though not, one may be sure, with the same effectiveness, or with the same dire consequences. Pharaoh might eat from his well-stocked larder for a week—which was as long as the plague lasted—and drink water from his own cisterns (and likewise the courtiers who were with him), but the poor of the land could not so refresh themselves. They had to scrape the soil for muddy water on the banks of the Nile, and at the same time do without a staple food that had hitherto been theirs for the taking. Even the children of

Israel in their wilderness journey remembered with lamentation the abundant fish they had eaten in Egypt at no cost to themselves (Num. 11:5).

How the people of the Hebrews responded to this first plague, and to the ineffectual parley that Moses had had with Pharaoh, is not stated, nor how they were affected by the polluted waters of the Nile. The pasturelands of Goshen were mainly far from the river, but there was, as has been shown, a substantial population of Hebrew slaves working in the Delta whose water supply could have been just as critical as was the Egyptians'. In later plagues a distinction is drawn between

their effects upon the Egyptian areas of population and those of the Hebrews, so was this also true of the first plague? If so, the reaction of the elders of the Israelites when Moses and Aaron returned could only have been favourable. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had at last revealed Himself as their champion. But neither Moses, nor the people themselves, could have guessed the Divine course that events would take for the humbling of the mighty nation that had so long held them in thrall, much less Pharaoh, dining sumptuously in his palace off the fat of the land.

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

Your Letters



Zipporah and the circumcision

Brother John Mitchell, in the fifth article of his series "[Moses: earth's meekest man](#)" ([Dec. 2006, p. 424](#)), has perceptively noted the significant placement of God's additional instructions to Moses between his setting out for Egypt and his crisis with the angel at the inn (Ex. 4:21-23). With strong references to first-born sons, both Yahweh's and Pharaoh's, the context clearly implies that it was therefore the uncircumcised status of Moses' own first-born son, Gershom, that was the obstacle to his progress.

I doubt, however, if Moses neglected his obligation to circumcise his son because of any opposition from Zipporah, as suggested by Brother Mitchell.¹ All six sons of her ancestor Keturah were circumcised in Abraham's household, as were Ishmael and Esau, and established their tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. Arabs still circumcise their sons in their thirteenth year, as this was the age when Ishmael received the rite. A list of Semitic circumcised tribes, including all the desert dwellers, appears in Jeremiah 9:25,26. (By the time of Jeremiah, the Egyptians had also adopted the practice, as shown in tomb paintings.)

By contrast, circumcision among the Hebrews had lapsed during their captivity in Egypt, so that God commanded Moses and Aaron to circumcise *all* males at the time of the Exodus (Ex. 12:50).² Despite reinstating this rite with the Law, Moses' record with circumcision continued to be poor. It

is surprising to note that he neglected to enforce it for the rest of the wilderness wanderings, so that the entire generation at the entrance to the Land had to be circumcised by Joshua (Josh. 5:2-8). We might speculate as to his reasons, whether apathy or distraction, but it is nonetheless clear that it had nothing to do with Zipporah.

Zipporah's issue was and continued to be with her own status as a 'foreign' wife among the Israelites. She would have been well aware that her ancestor Keturah was a slave-wife, and her sons were sent away so that they would not inherit with Isaac, the 'seed of promise'. With Moses now commissioned as leader of the Hebrew nation, Zipporah anticipated that she and her sons would not be deemed 'good enough'. This was soon borne out when Miriam criticised Moses for marrying a Cushite (Num 12:1). How interesting it is, therefore, that Zipporah used the words *hatan-damim*, 'blood relative',³ as she reproached Moses at the inn! It seems she was saying, "Now

1. See my article, "[Zipporah and the circumcision](#)" ([Sept. 2004, p. 350](#)).
2. See my article, "[The Circumcision at Marah](#)" ([Dec. 2001, p. 451](#)).
3. In Moses' writings, *hatan* is translated twice as 'marriages', once as 'son-in-law', once as 'mother-in-law' and fourteen times as 'father-in-law' (all referring to Jethro), but nowhere else as 'husband'. It refers to a relative by marriage through the bride.