

The Bible Story

EXODUS

Note: This is the Bible Story as a Grandpa told it. It was written for a grand-daughter who was only a few months old at the time, the dream being to finish the entire Bible by the time she was old enough to read it for herself. It has been written with two things in mind - that it's as accurate as possible, and readable, too. Some lengthy details about the design of the Tabernacle have been condensed or left out, but the rest of the story is here.

Chapter One - The new Pharaoh....

As the years passed, Joseph's brothers died off one by one but their descendants multiplied so rapidly the land of Goshen was full of them. The Egyptians weren't overly concerned, though, not while the memory of Joseph remained. But the years kept passing until, one day, a new Pharaoh came to power who hadn't even heard of Joseph and that's when life took a very nasty turn for the worse.

To the new Pharaoh the vast swarm of Israelites in his country represented a huge security risk. "Look at all these people," he muttered to himself, "think what would happen if they joined our enemies, fought against us and beat us. They'd throw us out and take over Egypt for themselves. Well, it's not going to happen, not while I'm in command. We must slow down their growth somehow."

He came up with, what he thought, was a brilliant idea. He would build two huge grain storage cities, Pithom and Rameses, and force all the Israelite men to do the backbreaking labour so they'd be too busy and too tired to have babies. But his clever little plan backfired because hard labour seemed to stimulate the Israelites into even greater baby production, and their numbers increased even faster.

Pharaoh resorted to more brutal measures. He ordered the two Israelite midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to come to his palace where he issued a stunning command. "When you two ladies are out there helping the Israelite mothers deliver their babies, I want you to check what sex the babies are as they're being born and if the baby is a boy, kill him. Pretend he died in childbirth or something; I don't care what you say or how you do it, just get rid of him. The girls can live but not the boys. Do you understand?"

Oh, they understood all right. This was deliberate, cold-blooded murder, designed to wipe Israel out as a people. But the midwives had far more respect for God than they did for Pharaoh, so they totally ignored Pharaoh's command and delivered every baby boy safe and sound.

It didn't take long, of course, for word to leak back to Pharaoh that the boys weren't being killed, so he ordered Shiphrah and Puah back to the palace for a piece of his mind. "How dare you defy my orders," he yelled, "I told you two to kill the boys and you haven't done it. Why not?"

"Please understand, your majesty," one of the ladies replied, "these Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. Hebrew women give birth to their babies so fast that it's all over and done with by the time we arrive, by which time it's too late for us to do what you said. How can we pretend the baby died in childbirth when it's alive and well in its mother's arms already?"

That set Pharaoh back on his heels a bit. He was no expert on childbirth so what could he say?

So that plan backfired as well, and God was so pleased with Shiphrah and Puah, he blessed them with wonderful families of their own. In the meantime, with all those baby boys surviving, the Israelites just grew and grew.

But Pharaoh wasn't finished. He knew he couldn't depend on those two crafty midwives to carry out his dastardly plans anymore, but he could turn to his own countrymen to help him out. He issued an order, therefore, to all Egyptians to keep their eyes and ears open for any sign or squeak that an Israelite boy had been born. He also gave them the authority to barge in, rip the child away from his parents and throw him into the River Nile.

There was no hiding what Pharaoh was up to anymore. This was blatant genocide of the worst sort, the killing of innocent babies.

Chapter 2 - One boy is saved....

For one family from the Israelite tribe of Levi, Pharaoh's new decree to search out and destroy their baby boys was terrible news, because the mother had just given birth to a strikingly beautiful child.

No way could she let this lovely sturdy boy die, but how could she hide the lusty cries of the ever-hungry child from the Egyptian spies? She knew she couldn't; in no time at all a nosy Egyptian would hear the telltale cries and her baby would be torn from her arms forever.

But she had an idea that might work to save him. She weaved a tiny basket, waterproofed it on the outside with oily black tar, snuggled the boy inside and, after one last feeding, placed the basket in the long grassy reeds along the bank of the River Nile. The boy's sister then watched from a distance to see what happened next.

The girl uttered a stifled gasp when a few minutes later she recognized Pharaoh's daughter approaching along the bank, with a group of ladies from the palace. The princess stopped just above the basket, slipped off her outer robe and while her ladies-in-waiting stood at the top of the bank, she slid down through the reeds for a quick swim.

She was about to launch herself into the water when she suddenly caught sight of the basket. She splashed her way over to take a closer look, then ran back up the bank shouting to her slave-girl to fetch the basket immediately and bring it to her.

When the princess lifted the lid and there was this beautiful baby boy blinking at her in the sudden sunlight, her eyes glistened with sympathy. "Oh!" she cried, "this must be one of the Hebrew children, but isn't he the most lovely child?" at which point the boy's sister slipped out of hiding and appeared very quietly by her side.

"Would you like me to find one of the Hebrew women to breastfeed the baby for you?" the girl whispered. Her boldness was rewarded with a look of surprise and then a smile from the princess.

"Why, yes," she replied to the girl, "that's a wonderful idea, thank you."

With her heart ready to burst at this marvellous turn of events, the girl scampered back to her mother to tell her the incredible news, that none other than Pharaoh's daughter herself had found the boy, wanted him kept alive and, what's more, she wanted the baby nursed by a Hebrew woman.

Well, what better Hebrew woman could there be than the baby's very own mother?! So the girl and her mother hurried back to the princess, who looked at the woman the young girl had brought and without hesitation said to her, "I would like you to take this baby and nurse him for me, and I'll pay you if you do."

Pay her?! A couple of hours ago the mother would've given anything just to see her baby survive but now she was about to be paid to nurse her own baby in the safety of Pharaoh's palace!

It was about to get better, too, because when the time came for the baby to stop nursing, the princess not only kept the baby, she adopted him as a son of her own. She gave him the name 'Moses,' meaning 'rescued,' in memory of that magic moment when she herself had rescued him from the river, and from certain death, as well.

So it was that Moses, a Hebrew boy who should've died in Pharaoh's diabolical bid to kill all the Israelite boys, grew up in the king's household as a member of the royal family. He was given the best of everything and treated with great respect by the palace staff, like a true prince of the realm. Moses had not only been rescued, he was now being trained as a leader in waiting.

Chapter 3 - Moses flees Egypt....

Moses was very much an Egyptian prince but Pharaoh's daughter had never hidden the fact from her son that he was also a Hebrew.

As Moses grew older, his curiosity about the Hebrew people and how they were being treated also grew. So, one day, he managed to slip out of the palace and he found a spot where he could watch the Hebrews at work, without being seen himself.

What he saw wasn't a pretty sight.

He was shocked to see how hard the Hebrews were being worked by the Egyptians, but shock quickly turned to blazing anger when a burly Egyptian guard dragged a helpless Hebrew into the shadows and knocked him to the ground.

The impact on Moses was instant. Casting caution aside, he broke cover, ran up to the Egyptian and whacked him over the head so hard that the man slumped to the ground without so much as a sigh or a gurgle, and he died right there on the spot.

Moses reeled back in surprise at the force of his own attack. He was unable to move for a few seconds as he gazed at the man lying dead at his feet. Fury soon turned to panic as he realized what he'd done.

He had to get rid of the man as soon as possible, so he scraped out a grave in the sand, rolled the Egyptian into it, filled in the hole and hurried away, desperately hoping no other eyes had witnessed what he'd done.

No alarm sounded that night, so Moses felt it was safe enough to return to the same area to continue his observation. He found another good hiding place and settled back to watch.

Suddenly, very close to where Moses was concealed, two Hebrews began yelling insults at each other. A fight broke out and fists began to fly.

Being so close to the action, Moses knew exactly who was in the wrong. He ran toward the men, shouting and pointing to the one who'd started the tussle, "Hey you, I saw what you did, you deliberately provoked this man here to get him to fight. Why would you do that to one of your own people?"

The man staggered back, taken completely by surprise, but he soon recovered on recognizing who Moses was. "So, who set you up, Moses, to be the great authority and judge over what we Hebrews do, eh?" he sneered, "Are you going to kill me too, like you killed that Egyptian yesterday?"

Moses turned white and nearly collapsed in fright because if news of the killing had spread this fast already, then Pharaoh would soon get wind of it, too. And that meant the death of him because Pharaoh wouldn't tolerate a Hebrew killing an Egyptian, even if Moses was a member of the royal family.

Moses was right. Pharaoh soon heard the news and immediately issued an order for Moses to be arrested and killed.

Moses had no choice but to run for his life, and to keep running until he was far out of range of the Egyptian hunting parties. He ended up eventually in Midian where, satisfied at last that he wasn't being pursued anymore, he settled down and set up home. It was a far cry from the princely life of privilege he'd enjoyed so far, but at least he was alive.

Chapter 4 - Moses marries....

On a balmy sunny afternoon many days later, Moses was relaxing in the shade of a well when out of the heat haze appeared the seven daughters of Jethro, the chief priest of Midian, to bucket out some water for their father's sheep. Moses stepped aside to give them room and watched with interest as they filled the troughs with water and the sheep began to drink.

Suddenly, there was a flurry of dust and a lot of shouting and out of the hills rushed some very angry looking shepherds who drove the girls away.

The rudeness of these brutes left Moses stunned for a second or two, but recovery came in a flash. With eyes blazing and nostrils flaring he stepped right up to the shepherds and yelled at them to back off, or else. The bullies swung round in surprise, saw Moses standing there on his own, dropped their buckets with a crash and quickly turned on him. But the look on Moses' face stopped them in their tracks. It was red enough to melt rock so they backed away without so much as a whimper and scampered off back to the hills.

Moses did a bit more yelling at their fleeing backsides and then turned in triumph to the girls and beckoned them back to the well, where he bucketed up their water in half the time it would've taken them.

When the girls returned back to their father much earlier than usual, he was pleasantly surprised. "You girls are back early; how come you did the job so quickly?"

"You'll never guess what happened, papa," one of the girls burst out, her eyes glistening with excitement, "We were filling up the water troughs when some of the other shepherds turned up and started pushing us around. But this Egyptian fellow we've never seen before, who was leaning up against the well at the time, took them all on, and all by himself, too. They were so scared they ran off as fast as their horrible little legs could carry them. The Egyptian then took our buckets and filled up the rest of our water troughs himself, finishing the job in half the time."

"Well, where is he?" Jethro cried, "you didn't leave him out there on his own, did you? Come on girls, let's get the man back here to eat with us."

So back Moses came with them and ended up staying as a permanent guest. He soon fell in love with Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, and they married. Along came a son of their own, Gershom, meaning 'a stranger here,' because for both Gershom and Moses there was no returning home to Egypt, not while there was still a price on Moses' head and Pharaoh was still alive.

Eventually, the old king died but the new Pharaoh treated the Israelites like scum, as well. They were nothing more than slaves now, and life from day to day was one long stream of misery.

In desperation they cried out for relief. And their cry was heard; God had never forgotten his promise to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rescue was on its way!

Chapter 5 - Moses leads the rescue....

Moses, meanwhile, had no idea that God was about to act, nor that God had been grooming him as the son of a king and now a shepherd, to lead the rescue mission!

Moses' only concern at that moment was to lead Jethro's sheep safely down to Mount Horeb, the 'mountain of God.' But waiting for him on the mountainside was an angel in the form of a burning bush. When Moses caught sight of the bush, he couldn't take his eyes off it, because the

bush was covered in flames but, for some odd reason, it wasn't burning up at all. "That's really weird," Moses said to himself, "how come the bush hasn't burnt to a crisp? I've never seen anything like it; I'm taking a look."

God watched Moses as he clambered up the rocky slope to take a closer look. When he'd almost reached the spot where the bush was merrily burning away, God spoke to him, his voice appearing to come out of the bush itself. "Moses," said the voice from the bush, "Moses."

The shock of a talking bush took Moses completely by surprise and all he could stammer in reply was, "Y-yes, h-here I am."

"Don't come any closer than you are already, Moses," God continued, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you're standing is holy ground."

There was a pause while Moses quickly unbuckled his sandals and slid them off his feet. Then God spoke again. "Moses, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Well, that was enough for Moses to immediately bury his face in his hands because if this was God then a man could die just by looking at him.

But Moses could still hear, so God continued talking. "I know all about the misery my people are suffering in Egypt at the hands of those wretched Egyptian slave-drivers, and I've heard their cry for help. So, I'm going to rescue them out of Egypt and bring them to a land so good it flows with milk and honey, and you, Moses, are going to lead the rescue party. I want you to go to Pharaoh and tell him to free up my people and let them go."

"Wh-what?" Moses stammered in fright, "Who, m-me? But I'm a n-nobody now. I can't go st-st-storming back to Egypt to tell a Ph-Ph-Pharaoh I don't even know to just l-let the Israelites go."

"But I'll be with you every step of the way, Moses," God replied, "And no one's going to think you're a nobody when the Israelites are out of Egypt and worshipping me at this mountain, are they?"

"But if the Israelites want to know who's b-b-behind all this," Moses replied, "who d-do I say it is? What name d-do I give them?"

"Tell them it's 'the Lord' who sent you," God replied. "Tell them it's the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the one and only 'ever-living, ever-present Lord.' And tell them that's the name I go by from this point on, too. So, now that we've got who I am sorted out, it's time you got going."

"I want you to go to Egypt," the Lord continued. "Assemble all the elders of Israel together and tell them I've seen the awful things happening to them and I'm going to end their misery by leading them out of Egypt to a much better land. You and the elders will then march over to the Pharaoh and give him the same message, informing him that the Israelites want three days leave to go into the desert and offer sacrifices to me. Don't be surprised if the Pharaoh reacts badly; I know him well and he'll need to be squeezed 'til he squeals. He won't agree to your terms to begin with, but he will after I've hit him and his people with such a dose of my power they'll be begging to let you go. And I'll make sure the Egyptians don't let you leave the country empty-handed, either. All you'll need do at that point is ask and the Egyptians will shower you with as much jewelry and clothing as you can carry."

"But the Israelites will never l-l-listen to the l-l-likes of me," Moses protested, his stammering getting worse, "they'll just l-l-look at me and say I m-made this all up myself."

"Oh, they will, will they?" God replied, "Then tell me what you're holding in your hand there, Moses."

"It's my sh-shepherd's staff," Moses replied.

“Throw it on the ground,” God said.

Moses wasn't quite sure where all this was going but he did as God said and threw his staff to the ground. To Moses' astonishment, the stick began to curl and twist as if it had a life of its own. Two eyes and a mouth appeared in the wood and when the mouth opened, out flicked the forked tongue of a real live snake! Moses leapt back in alarm as the snake hissed and writhed at his feet.

“Now grab the snake by the tail,” God said, which Moses did and he felt the snake go rigid, then straight, and there he was holding his wooden staff again!

“Now that should convince them, don't you think?” God asked, “But just in case they're still a bit doubtful, put your hand inside the flap of your coat.”

Moses tensed, but he did as God said and immediately wished he hadn't because he could feel his fingers curling and twisting just like the snake, as if they had a life of their own, too. In alarm he jerked out his hand and, to his horror, the skin had turned deathly white and his fingers had shrivelled up into stubby little knobs. It scared him even more than the snake.

God then told Moses to put his hand back inside his coat. When he pulled out his hand, it was back to its normal self again.

“So,” God said, after Moses had recovered from the shock, “if they don't believe you after the snake trick, hit them with the hand-in-the-coat trick. And if that doesn't work, go fetch some water from the River Nile, pour it on the ground at their feet and it will instantly turn into blood. Now that should raise an eyebrow or two.”

The only eyebrows being raised at this point, though, belonged to Moses, because he was not happy about any of this himself yet.

“But L-Lord,” he stammered again, “Going to people and sp-speaking to them just isn't my strong p-point. I'm awkward and I stammer in public as you've prob-prob-probably noticed, and besides, you never asked me to do anything l-like this in the past because of my handicap, so why should it be any different now?”

“Come on Moses,” God replied, “Who do you think gives people the power of speech in the first place? Who has the power to make people deaf and dumb? Who has the power to give people good eyesight or none at all? It's me, Moses, it's me. I can easily make up for your handicap. With my help you'll be fine.”

“Y-yes, Lord, I'm sure that's true,” Moses replied, “but c-couldn't you send someone else?”

“Send someone else?” God replied, sounding exasperated, “No, Moses, I'm sending you, whether you think you're fit for the job or not. But if you're really that scared of speaking in public I'll get your brother Aaron to do the speaking for you. He can be the mouth but you will supply the words, because I'm only telling you what I want said. I'll tell you what to say, you then tell Aaron what I told you and he can tell the people what you told him. Aaron won't mind at all. He's on his way right now, in fact, and he's very much looking forward to seeing you. The two of you will make a fine team, so talk things over and let's get going. Oh, and don't forget your shepherd's staff, there's nothing like a bit of magic to get people's attention!”

Moses felt numb all over. This was the last thing on earth he wanted to do. But God clearly wasn't accepting any more excuses. So, later that day, Moses told Jethro he was taking his family back to Egypt to see if his Israelite clansmen were still alive. “Yes, I understand,” Jethro said encouragingly, “the Israelites are your people, so go ahead and do what you think best, and I hope the journey goes well for all of you.”

Just before they left Midian, God also tried to encourage Moses by telling him he'd have no trouble entering Egypt because those who wanted Moses dead had all died themselves already.

But Moses was in a foul mood by now and no amount of encouragement could remove the dread he felt as he packed up his family and headed for the Egyptian border.

Chapter 6 - Face to face with Pharaoh...

“Now that you’re on your way at last, Moses,” God said, “keep in mind the power I’ve given you and don’t be afraid to show it, even to the great Pharaoh himself. He’s going to be a tough nut to crack but you just tell him from me that Israel is my firstborn son and if he doesn’t let my firstborn son worship me, then I will kill his firstborn son.”

Threaten Pharaoh with the death of his son? Oh, that’s just great, Moses muttered angrily to himself; I’m a dead man for certain now. And with every step of the way, Moses’ mood got blacker and his resistance got stiffer. He even refused to circumcise his son, a real thumb in the eye to God, so one night in camp, God confronted Moses in his tent and was about to kill him for his stinking attitude, when Zipporah jumped in just in time.

She’d been shaken awake by the sounds of a scuffle and choking noises. She sat bolt upright, heart thudding, to discover her husband lying on the ground with a terrified look on his face and God sitting on his chest with his hands round Moses’ throat threatening to kill him for refusing to circumcise their son.

She knew by his bulging eyes and frantic grabbing at God’s wrists that Moses would only last a few more seconds. She screamed for God to stop while she scrambled frantically on the ground looking for a stone with a sharp edge. On finding one, she quickly grabbed her son, lifted his nightshirt baring his penis and sliced off the boy’s foreskin. Sobbing her heart out, she then placed the tiny circle of skin with its little ring of blood on the genitals of her husband, crying, “May the blood of our boy’s circumcision save your life, my dear husband, because I don’t want to lose you.”

It was a tense moment as she tearfully looked into Moses’ eyes and he fearfully looked into God’s. But God was satisfied and he slowly lifted his hands off Moses’ throat and let him go.

Aaron, meanwhile, in contrast to his brother, was following God’s orders to the letter. As God had instructed, he was on his way to meet Moses at Mount Horeb. It was here that a much humbled Moses explained to Aaron what God wanted them to do, and the tricks he’d given them to perform.

Feeling a whole lot better having his brother by his side, Moses slipped into Egypt, located the Israelite elders and passed on the incredible news that God had heard their cry for help and was sending in a rescue team to end their misery. With the snake trick and the hand-in-the-coat trick as back up, it didn’t take long to convince them. The elders were so relieved, they sank to the ground in gratitude.

Now to the really tough part; go see Pharaoh. But that’s what God wanted, so off to the palace they trudged to present themselves to Pharaoh, with Aaron doing the talking as arranged.

“We have a message for you delivered to us in person by the Lord, the great God of the Israelites himself,” Aaron said, his voice strong and confident. “This is the message: ‘You are to let my people go so they can hold a celebration in my honour in the desert.’”

Pharaoh’s reaction was instant. “Is that right?” he sneered, “The Lord told you, did he? Well, I don’t accept anyone’s lordship over me, so the answer is no, I’m not letting Israel go.”

To Pharaoh’s surprise that didn’t stop Aaron from continuing, however.

“Well, that’s too bad,” Aaron replied, “because the God of the Hebrews made it very clear to both of us when he met us that if we don’t get your permission to take a three day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to him, he might strike us with either plagues or the sword.”

Pharaoh’s patience quickly reached its limit. “And I’m supposed to care about that, am I? How dare you two jokers come stomping in here distracting the Israelites like this. They’ve got work to do. Do you realize the chaos it would cause if they stopped working? More than half our work force is made up of Israelites, and you just expect them to drop tools and head out to the desert? Absolutely not, I say.”

Pharaoh was so put out by the downright cheek of it all that he immediately gave orders to the slave-masters and the Israelite foremen to stop supplying the Israelites with straw for the making of bricks. “They can gather their own straw from now on,” he yelled, turning deeper shades of purple as his anger grew, “but they’d better produce the same number of bricks every day as they did when we gathered the straw for them. Not one brick less, do you hear? That’ll teach this lazy bunch of good-for-nothings a thing or two. You just keep working them hard, men, and don’t be taken in by their stupid excuses.”

So, instead of promised relief, things only got worse for the Israelites. They had to scour the land in all directions for straw while constantly producing the same number of bricks as before. When they fell behind a couple of days in a row, the Israelite foremen were punished, since they were being held responsible. It was so difficult trying to keep up that the Israelite foremen finally appealed to Pharaoh directly.

“Why is your majesty treating us like this?” the leader asked, “We’re not being given straw anymore, yet every day we’re expected to supply the same number of bricks. It’s not our fault we can’t keep up, yet we’re the ones being punished.”

“Not your fault, you say?” Pharaoh roared in response, “Of course it’s your fault. You’re all bone idle, that’s your problem. That’s why you keep harping on about skipping off into the desert. Get back to work all of you, and I want the full tally of bricks every day as usual, do you hear?”

The foremen left the palace, scared and angry. When they caught sight of Moses and Aaron waiting for them, they really let loose. “Do you realize what you two idiots have done?” one of the foremen yelled, stabbing his finger at Moses, “I hope God’s judgment comes crashing down on both of you because Pharaoh and the Egyptians hate us even more now, and all because of you.”

But it wasn’t because of me, Moses thought, this was God’s doing. So he asked God, “Can you tell me what’s going on here? I tell Pharaoh what you want said and there’s been nothing but trouble. You haven’t done anything to make things better as you promised.”

“Don’t worry,” God replied, “by the time I’m finished with Pharaoh, he’ll be begging you to leave. Remember who I said I am, Moses. I am the ever-present, always living Lord. Even Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never knew me by the name ‘Lord,’ but you do, to remind you every time you use that name, just who I am. Why do you think I heard the Israelites’ distress call in Egypt in the first place? Because of who I am. I haven’t forgotten my promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give the land of Canaan to their descendants, and I never will forget it either, because of who I am. So tell the Israelites again: ‘I am the ever-present, always living Lord, and I promise I will reach out my arms to rescue you. I will perform incredible miracles to set you free, because you are my people and I am your God. I’m on your side and I will stick to my promise to free you and take you to a better land. I am the Lord, so take it from me, it’s as good as done.’”

But the Israelites were past listening; they'd reached the end of their rope and they couldn't take any more. So the Lord told Moses, "Go tell Pharaoh again to let the Israelites go."

Moses could hardly believe his ears. "But what hope have I got of Pharaoh listening to a stammering sp-speaker like me when my own p-people don't even listen to me?" he protested.

It was no use, though. The Lord simply reminded Moses it was his job to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and that was that. But he did go on to say to Moses, "Look, I know it's tough right now but the Egyptians will eventually come around, especially after they've seen me in action. I'm making Pharaoh stubborn on purpose so I can show these people the kind of power I have and then they'll pay attention. For them it's the only way."

So, despite their reservations and their age, what with Moses being eighty years old by now and Aaron eighty three, they did what God wanted.

Chapter 7 - The plagues begin....

"By the way," God said to Moses as he and Aaron went to speak with Pharaoh again, "if Pharaoh demands some sort of sign when you meet him, tell Aaron to throw down his shepherd's staff at Pharaoh's feet and let's see how the old goat reacts when it turns into a snake."

But Pharaoh wasn't the least bit impressed. He casually summoned the palace magicians who repeated the same trick. He should've been impressed when Aaron's snake pounced on all the Egyptian snakes and gobbled them up, but he wasn't and he remained as stubborn as ever.

"It's all right, I saw what happened," God said to Moses, after he returned, "So, tomorrow morning catch Pharaoh on his way out to the Nile river. Tell Aaron to stand on the bank, wave his staff in the air and yell, 'Pharaoh, the Lord sent me to tell you to let his people go, but you refused,' at which point Aaron lowers his staff and shouts, 'Well, now you're going to know that he's the Lord,' and then he touches the water with the staff. The water will immediately turn to blood, killing off all the fish and making the water undrinkable. Every river, canal and every pool and cistern in Egypt will turn to blood, even the water in their bowls and jars, too."

But Pharaoh's magicians repeated that trick, too, so again the king dismissed the Lord's demands and returned to his palace as if nothing had happened. The Egyptians, meanwhile, had to dig for drinkable water for the next seven days, but that didn't soften Pharaoh's heart, either.

So God told Moses to go back to Pharaoh, have Aaron wave his staff over the river again and this time every river, canal and pond would belch out millions upon millions of frogs.

Which is exactly what happened.

Tons of frogs came pouring out of pool and puddle, hopped across the countryside in a huge croaking mass, spilling into people's cooking ovens and mixing bowls and filling up their houses with frog stuff. They even got into Pharaoh's bedroom and all over his bed!

Amazingly, Pharaoh's magicians could produce frogs as well, but Pharaoh didn't need more frogs; he was sick of frogs! They were all over the palace already, croaking all through the night and littering the furniture with frog mess. He'd do anything to get rid of them, so he summoned Moses and Aaron back to the palace.

"Ask the Lord," he shouted above the croaking racket, "to remove these confounded frogs. I'll let your people sacrifice to him if he does."

Well, Pharaoh had never said that before, so was he beginning to crack at last?

Moses looked at him for a while, waiting to see if the king would catch himself and change his mind - but no, that was all he said.

“All right,” Moses replied, “choose your time for me to pray for you and the frogs will be gone.”

“Tomorrow,” Pharaoh replied wearily.

“Good,” Moses said, “Tomorrow it is, then. The only frogs left alive will be those that normally inhabit the River Nile. The rest will die. In the meantime, I hope you learn from all this, Pharaoh, that your gods are no match for the Lord our God.”

True to his word, when Moses prayed, the frogs died. But that left dead frogs all over the countryside. The ground was so thick with them, the Egyptians could only sweep them into huge piles and leave them to rot in the blazing sun. The stench of rotting frog was awful, but to Pharaoh the smell was like roses because it meant the frogs were gone at last.

Feeling like his old stubborn self again, he immediately reversed his decision to let the Israelites go. He was soon going to wish he hadn't, though, because an even worse plague was on its way.

According to the Lord's instructions, Aaron struck the ground with his staff, at which point every speck of dust instantly turned into a crawling, writhing maggot. Maggots spewed out of the dust all over Egypt, covering everything the frogs covered before. But being so much smaller than frogs, the maggots could crawl into the tiniest spaces, so they were everywhere, and what a horrible, smelly mess they made when squished in large quantities.

Pharaoh immediately hauled in his magicians to repeat the same trick, but this time, no matter how many spells they cast, they couldn't do it. Frogs they could produce, but not maggots. Even the magicians now admitted - and right to Pharaoh's face, too - that this latest plague had to be the hand of God. But Pharaoh just ignored them.

So the Lord told Moses it would be flies next, huge noisy swarms of them blackening the sky and landing on everything in sight, getting in people's eyes, in their hair and on their food.

But there would be no flies in Goshen where the Israelites lived. “I'm keeping Goshen free of flies,” the Lord said, “to let these Egyptians realize I'm real and not to be fooled with.”

Next day, the flies came. They poured into Pharaoh's palace, bringing all the daily business and food preparations to a grinding halt. All over Egypt the same thing happened, threatening the entire country with ruin.

“You win,” Pharaoh yelled above the infuriating hum when Moses and Aaron arrived at the palace again. “You can sacrifice to your God - but,” he added, swatting furiously at the flies buzzing round his face, “you can only sacrifice if you stay here in Egypt.”

“But we can't do that,” Moses replied hastily, “it would infuriate your people. If they see us sacrificing to our God, they'll stone us to death. That's why we have to take at least a three day journey away from here to be out of their sight, and besides, that's what the Lord our God told us to do, so there's no choice here, we have to go.”

“Then go,” Pharaoh shouted, waving his arm in exasperation, “Go sacrifice to your God in the desert, but don't you go too far, mind you, and get rid of the flies before you leave, too.”

“As soon as I leave,” Moses replied, “I'll ask the Lord to get rid of the flies and tomorrow they'll be gone, but, your majesty, don't try to deceive us again.”

But that's exactly what Pharaoh did do; as soon as the flies disappeared, he changed his mind and refused to let the Israelites leave the country.

“Go back to Pharaoh,” the Lord told Moses, “and tell him that if he insists on keeping you trapped here, I'm going to inflict a devastating disease on all the animals his country depends on. Cattle, horses, camels, sheep and donkeys will die in their thousands, but not one Israelite animal will die. Tell him it's going to happen tomorrow, too.”

Tomorrow came and it all happened just as the Lord said. Pharaoh immediately wanted to know if any of the Israelite animals had died, but of course none had, which should've knocked the steam right out of him, but it didn't. Instead, he dug his heels in even deeper and refused to budge.

So, the Lord unleashed yet another awful plague, telling Moses and Aaron to "gather some handfuls of soot from a potter's kiln and you, Moses, throw it up in the air where Pharaoh can see you doing it. He'll watch those few handfuls instantly expand into a huge billowing cloud that spreads across the entire land like a raging desert sandstorm, covering animals and people alike with a fine dust, and wherever the dust touches exposed skin it will instantly turn into huge, painful boils."

Pharaoh's magicians were no match for Moses on this plague, either. They were in too much pain themselves to bother, anyway. But Pharaoh, in just as much pain himself, still held out. So, the Lord said to Moses, "Tell Pharaoh from me: 'I could've wiped you out by now, you and all your people with you, and the memory of you would've vanished from the earth for ever. But I kept you alive to give you a taste of my power, and to spread word beyond the borders of Egypt that I'm not to be tangled with. By rights you should be dead, but rather than kill you I'm going to strike you at this time tomorrow with a raging hailstorm, the likes of which has never been seen before in your country. The storm will be so violent that anything left out in the open will either die or be destroyed, so I advise you now to get your animals under cover.'"

Panic struck as the warning spread and animals were quickly rushed under roof. But some people didn't take the warning to heart and left their animals out in the fields, thinking a little hail wouldn't hurt them.

But the hailstorm God had in mind was a killer. As Moses raised his staff to the sky, thunder rolled through the gathering clouds and from their blackening mass spat a mixture of fire and ice that shattered trees and battered anyone stupid enough to be outside. But the Israelites were in no danger at all, even those outside in the open, because where they lived the weather was fine.

Pharaoh was an exhausted wreck by the time Moses and Aaron arrived at the palace.

When he looked up through bloodshot eyes and saw them standing there in front of him, he cried out, his voice croaking with emotion, "I have been so terribly, terribly wrong, I know that now. The Lord has every right to do what he's done and we have all been wrong in resisting him. Please, then, ask the Lord to end this terrible storm and I will surely let you go, I promise."

"As soon as I'm out of the city," Moses replied, "I'll ask the Lord to end the storm to prove yet again that the power belongs to him, not you. But you don't respect his power yet, do you? You think you can somehow outlast him because the hail didn't destroy all your crops. How foolish and proud you are."

Moses was right because as soon as the storm ceased, Pharaoh and his palace cronies all put their noses back in the air and refused to let the Israelites go.

"It's not your fault, Moses," God told him later, "I made them stubborn so that the more they resist the more of my power they see. And think of the amazing stories you'll be able to tell your children and grandchildren one day, how those proud Egyptians found out who was really in charge. So, back you two go to Pharaoh and tell him that."

Which is what they did, armed with yet another dreadful plague if Pharaoh didn't listen.

"We've got another message from the Lord, Pharaoh, and this is it: 'How long are you going to keep this up, refusing to humble yourself before me? How many times do I have to repeat myself, to let my people go to worship me? Because if you don't let them go, tomorrow you're getting locusts, billions and billions of them, locusts so thick on the ground you won't be able to

see it. And what the hail didn't wipe out, the locusts will. There won't be a tree in the land with a leaf on it. Never in Egypt has there been a plague of locusts on this scale; every house in the land will be crawling with them, including your palace.'"

As Moses and Aaron left and the doors clanked shut behind them, the nerves of the palace staff finally snapped. They flung themselves at Pharaoh's feet, begging him to give in. "How long are you going to keep on resisting like this?" one man cried, "Please, just let the men go and worship their God, because if we play this stupid game any longer, our country will be ruined - if it hasn't been ruined already."

Pharaoh glared at their desperate faces and then angrily yelled an order to get Moses and Aaron back in the room. Bristling at the cheek of being challenged so rudely, he was in a foul mood by the time Moses and Aaron arrived.

"Go," he bellowed at the top of his voice as soon as they entered the room, "go worship the Lord your God if you must, but," he paused, "who's going to the desert with you?"

"Why, everyone of course," Moses replied, surprised at the question, "the Lord wants everyone there, young and old, boys and girls, even the sheep and cattle. He means all of us, animals included."

"So I have to let you all go, do I?" Pharaoh answered back, "And I suppose I'm to say 'the Lord be with you' as you go, am I?" he added sarcastically.

But he could afford a little sarcasm, he thought to himself, because an idea had struck him that might turn the tables on Moses and even salvage some of his own pride in the process, too. It was that impertinent plea by the member of his staff that had triggered it. The man had pleaded with him to let the Israelite men go - just the men - not everyone, as Moses had requested.

Aha! He would only let the men go, then. Yes, that was it, he smiled wickedly to himself, just the men. Oh, I've got you now, Moses!

Pharaoh slowly scanned the crowd for dramatic effect, then jumped off his throne and, pointing at a spot right between Moses' eyeballs, he yelled, "May I remind you Moses, as one of my staff just reminded me, that it was only the men you asked for to go worship your Lord, not everyone as you're saying now. So, since you only asked for the men, only the men can go. The rest of your people will stay here. Now get out of my sight, both of you. Guards, don't just stand there with your mouths open, throw them out of here, now."

Pharaoh's mood was getting uglier but the hot air pouring out of him was nothing compared to the howling wind that came blasting in from the east that very same day when the Lord told Moses to raise his staff to the sky again.

All that day and all night the wind howled; and with it next morning came the locusts. Billions of flying grasshoppers swept the land, in swarms so dense the sky and the ground turned black with them. Every bit of fruit and greenery the hail hadn't touched, the locusts polished off, leaving the land looking like the middle of winter. Never had the country been hit with anything like this before.

Pharaoh was quick to react. Gone was the sneering bluster of yesterday.

"I have sinned," he moaned, "I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you Moses, and you too, Aaron. I beg you to forgive me. Will you do that for me, just this once, and please ask the Lord to take away the locusts; they're killing us."

In reply to Moses' prayer, the Lord switched the easterly gale to a westerly gale and blew all the locusts into the Sea of Reeds, leaving Egypt completely free of them. But the Lord also switched Pharaoh's mood from humble to proud, as well, because he hadn't finished what he had in mind with Pharaoh yet.

With Pharaoh back in stubborn mode, Moses raised his staff to the sky once more as the Lord instructed and this time a darkness more terrifying than the locusts swept over Egypt. All light completely disappeared for three days, enveloping the entire country in a black fog, a fog so dense it was like a wall. It pressed in on them like an invisible weight, closing in on them and suffocating them as though the air had turned to oil. Even with their noses touching, people couldn't see each other.

For three days nobody moved because they couldn't see where they were going. But where the Israelites lived it was fine, the sun shone brightly and life went on as usual.

Again Moses and Aaron were called to the palace. Hundreds of lamps at full brightness hardly pierced the darkness but through the eerie glow they could see Pharaoh slumped on his throne. The flickering light picked up the look on his face as he slowly raised his head. He looked like a madman.

Emitting a growl that sounded more animal than human, he murmured, "Go worship the Lord and you can take your wives and children with you, but," he paused dreadfully, the shadows outlining the look of utter contempt on his face, "your sheep and your cattle must stay here; I won't let you take them with you."

"That's what you think Pharaoh," Moses replied, without hesitation or stammer, "our animals are coming with us whether you like it or not. We're not leaving one hoof behind. You have to let our animals go because we have no way of knowing 'til we get there if the animals you supply for our sacrifices will be enough. We may need to sacrifice some of our own animals, too."

The darkness nearly disappeared in the explosion that followed Moses' reply. "How dare you tell me what to do," Pharaoh screamed, globs of spit hissing through the darkness, "Get out of my sight you insolent little twirps and don't you ever lay eyes on my face again, for on the day you do, you die."

"Oh my, you're so right about that," Moses said quietly, "because the time is coming when I won't see your face again."

Chapter 8 - The last terrible plague....

"I have one last plague to come," the Lord told Moses, "and this time Pharaoh will let you go. But not just let you go, he's going to throw you out of the country like a man throws out a bride who cheats on him. So, go tell the people to start collecting the Egyptians' jewelry, now."

The Egyptians gladly gave the Israelites all the silver and gold they asked for, partly due to the Lord giving the Egyptians a giving attitude and partly due to the enormous respect the Egyptians held for Moses himself.

Now for one last confrontation with Pharaoh. Moses stomped into the palace, marched up to Pharaoh and glared at him eyeball to eyeball.

"The Lord gave me this one last message for you, Pharaoh, and this is it: 'At the stroke of midnight tonight, every firstborn child, from your own firstborn child to the firstborn child of a mere slave-girl at the grinding mill, will die, as will the firstborn of all your cattle. A cry of anguish will be heard all over Egypt, so terrible it will never be heard like that again, nor has such sorrow ever been witnessed before. But you won't hear any sound at all in Israel, not even a dog barking, because all this is happening to your people, not to them.'"

In one last blast of fury, Moses strode up to Pharaoh and with noses almost touching he said, "You don't believe a word the Lord is saying, do you? But you're on your own now, Pharaoh, because the rest of your palace staff do believe. They're begging me, even throwing themselves at my feet now, desperately pleading with me, 'Get out of here, Moses, all of you, just please go.' So we're going, Pharaoh, and don't you dare try stopping us."

Moses spun on his heel and strode out of the palace. The Lord told him later that Pharaoh had laughed the whole thing off and still refused to listen, even after all these staggering signs, but that's the way it had to be.

The Lord now turned his attention to getting the Israelites ready to leave.

"On the tenth of this month," he said, "I want every Israelite family to find themselves a year old lamb or goat, or share one with a neighbour. Wait four days, until the fourteenth, and then kill the animals between sunset and dark, just as the fourteenth day begins. When you kill the animals, catch the blood and smear it all round the entrance doors to your homes. Roast the meat and eat it that night, with unleavened bread and sharp tasting herbs. Anything left over from the meal, burn it. Make sure you're fully dressed and ready to leave at any second - and why is that? Because, on the night of the fourteenth I'm going to show my power over these paltry gods of Egypt by killing every firstborn Egyptian child and animal. But none of your firstborn will die. I will pass over your homes because of the blood you smeared on your doorframes. That's why this night will be called the Lord's 'Passover.' Remember this night from now on, and if your children happen to ask you what it's all about, tell them you are keeping the memory alive of me passing over your homes when I struck my final blow on Egypt."

Quickly, Moses gathered all the elders, explained what the Lord wanted done and sent them to spread the word immediately, because there was no time to lose. Their obedience meant the difference between life and death.

And how true that was as midnight struck on the fourteenth. All firstborn Egyptians instantly died, either in their sleep or, if they were awake, they simply dropped down dead. In every Egyptian home someone died.

The first deaths discovered started off the wailing. Cries of anguish echoed through the streets bringing others to instant and fearful wakefulness. Their cries soon joined the first, as they too found a loved one dead. The cry of despair that filled the air was chilling and dreadful. And when Pharaoh heard it and rushed to the bedside of his firstborn son, his own piercing cry of agony joined the rest as he lifted the lifeless body of his son from the bed and held him close.

Pharaoh wasted little time summoning Moses and Aaron to the palace. He looked terrible. Spent with grief, he could only manage a hoarse whisper and short sentences. "Leave us," he rasped, "Leave my people. Go worship. Take your sheep. Take your cattle. Just go. But," he paused dreadfully yet again, "don't go without asking God to bless me."

There was no telling what Pharaoh meant by that last statement, but the rest of his people weren't waiting to find out. All they cared about was ridding Egypt of every last Israelite before Pharaoh changed his mind again and another disastrous plague came crashing down upon them. "One more plague will be the death of us," they cried, "so please, just go, now, before we're all killed."

With the Egyptians constantly prodding and pushing them to leave, the Israelites had just enough time to pack up their bread-making equipment and sling it over their shoulders, but no time at all to prepare any food for the journey. All they had was some leftover unleavened bread dough to take with them, and that was it.

But what a night and what a sight as the Israelites poured out of the land that had held them in its grip for so long. A crowd of at least six hundred thousand people and all their animals, along with thousands of others fleeing Egypt with them, filled the road out of Rameses like a gigantic meandering caterpillar. It was a night to be remembered for always. Wide-eyed Israelite children would be told the story of this night every year from now on, about the mighty Pharaoh who wouldn't let the Israelites go, but the trouncing he got from the Lord!

The Israelites were delirious with joy because every step they took meant one more step away from Egypt. But they were weak and they had no weapons so the Lord avoided the obvious road straight east to the land of the Philistines. In their weakened condition, a fight against a vastly superior enemy might create an Israelite stampede all the way back to Egypt, so he took them by a safer route off the main road and into the desert towards the Sea of Reeds. And somehow, in all this rush, they managed to remember Joseph's wish, to have his bones taken with them when they left, so Joseph was going home at last, too.

They had no trouble knowing where the Lord was leading them because an angel appeared in front of them like a pillar of fire, lighting up the night like a huge lantern, which slowly transformed into a cloud to shade them from the desert heat as the sun began to rise. The Lord was also giving detailed directions to Moses, the latest being to take a sudden turn to the north to appear as though they hadn't a clue where they were going!

"My plan, Moses, is to make Pharaoh think you took a wrong turn and you've got yourselves bogged down and stuck, jammed up against the Sea of Reeds in front, hemmed in by hills on each side and unable to go on. He'll get very excited by that, because I'll make sure he will, and he'll come charging out after you with an army big enough, he thinks, to kill every last one of you. But don't worry, I'll be waiting for him. I'll show these proud Egyptians once and for all that I, the Lord, am in charge here."

Chapter 9 - Trapped!....

Pharaoh could hardly believe his luck when reports began trickling into the palace that the Israelites had been floundering around the desert completely lost and were now trapped in the hill country with no place left to go. "We can net them like flies," Pharaoh yelled gleefully to his generals, "so let's go men, let's go get them!"

To the rousing cheers of his staff, Pharaoh roared out of the palace, yelling to his servants to prepare his war chariot for action. He sent out an urgent order to his six hundred best charioteers, the pick of the land, to be ready for battle as soon as possible. He also ordered anyone else who had a chariot to find himself a commander and be ready to follow them. Every available fighting man, cavalryman and foot soldier, the entire might of Egypt, was eventually mobilized for battle.

Armed to the teeth, they rumbled out of town in hot pursuit. The lightweight chariots gobbled up in hours what had taken the Israelites several days, so it wasn't long before the leading charioteers spied the Israelite camp up ahead. With a cry of triumph, Pharaoh whipped his horses into a frenzied gallop.

The rising column of dust and the distant rumble in the hills had already alerted the Israelites and sent panic through the camp. An awful scream of terror rose when the unmistakable shape of Egyptian war chariots came into view.

The people closest to Moses began wailing at him, "Look what you've done, you madman! Weren't there enough graves in Egypt to bury us there? Is that why you brought us out here to die instead? Didn't we tell you to leave us alone? Didn't we tell you leave us in slavery?"

Moses quickly cut them off. He raised his staff up high and shouted above the din, "Fear not. Stand your ground and watch the Lord deliver you, for as sure as you see those Egyptians now, you will never see them again. The Lord is fighting for you, so stand still and watch."

At which point the pillar of cloud in front of the Israelites swirled over their heads and took up position behind them, forming a fog so thick it brought the Egyptian charge to a hoof-digging, brake-grinding halt. The frontrunners tried to pierce the fog but it was like oil. It filled their lungs and choked them. They couldn't breathe. Gasping for air, they quickly retreated to safety, and even Pharaoh had to accept they were stuck where they were, fuming and frustrated, until the fog lifted.

With the immediate danger dealt with, the Lord asked Moses, "Why are the people still wailing? There's no cause for alarm anymore, so tell them to use up their energy instead on getting packed up and ready to go. And make it quick, too. When they're ready, raise your staff and point it toward the sea. Where you point, the sea will part in two, opening up a channel to the opposite bank. Walk down to the sea's edge and lead the people through the channel and I'll make sure the seabed is dry so you won't get stuck in the mud. When you're through, I'll lift the cloud. The Egyptians will catch sight of you and dive in after you, and that's when I'll really show them who's Lord round here!"

The wailing gradually lessened through the camp as word spread that another miracle was coming. They quickly packed and in eager anticipation of yet another remarkable sight, all eyes turned toward Moses. A hush settled over the crowd as they watched him raise his staff and stab it in the direction of the sea. To their amazement, the waves split apart like a butcher slicing through meat, opening up a path all the way to the opposite bank. On both sides of the channel, the sea rose like walls, creating a trough wide enough for even a crowd their size to escape through. The Lord had provided yet again!

But no sign came from Moses to move forward. It was clear why a few moments later. A howling wind came screaming in from the east and for several hours that night it whistled down the channel, doing a grand job of drying off the seabed.

When the wind died down and the seabed was dry, it was then that Moses gave the signal for the Israelites to grab their belongings and follow him into the sea. Thoughts of escape were all that mattered now, so into the sea they went.

It was dark and they could barely make out the walls of water towering up on each side, but they could hear the water sloshing away. It kept them moving at a rapid pace, and the bobbing lanterns of the leaders showed good progress, but it still took many hours for that huge throng to snake its way through the sea.

When, at last, most of them had reached the opposite bank the angel lifted the cloud and let Pharaoh see what had happened.

The Israelites had completely disappeared! He rubbed his eyes and looked again and there stretching out before him he could see the reason why. The sea had parted! Those wretched Israelites had escaped his clutches again! Or had they? If that's where they'd gone, then he was going in after them. And then someone yelled he could see people up there in the channel, on the far side. It had to be them.

With a blood-curdling cry Pharaoh whipped his horse into a gallop and charged in after the fleeing figures. A mighty yell rose as the other charioteers, followed by the cavalry and foot-

soldiers careened down the bank after him. The Lord watched and waited until they were all well into the sea and then, in the blink of an eye, he transformed the dry seabed into gooey, sticky mud. The narrow wheels of the battle chariots sliced through the mud like a knife through butter, sinking the chariots up to their axles and slowing them to a snail's pace. Mud glued to the horses' legs and sucked them to a standstill. Panic spread through the entire army as the cry went up, "Run, run for your lives; it's the Lord, we're doomed."

By now most of the Israelites had climbed the far slope and collapsed on the bank gasping with relief. Their relief was short-lived, however, because those in the rear had heard the cries of the Egyptians behind them and in frightful panic were rushing up the bank to escape. It certainly got the stragglers moving and out of the sea into safety. The Lord then told Moses, "Point your staff toward the sea again and I'll bring the water crashing down on the Egyptians while they're pinned out there in the middle."

Moses raised his staff and the walls of water crumpled inward, crushing the Egyptians as they scrambled through the ooze to save themselves.

There was no escape.

By the time the sun appeared over the horizon and the waves had settled, the entire Egyptian army was dead. As the bodies of the dead floated to the surface and drifted onto shore, the Israelites just stood and watched in awed silence. Who could doubt the Lord, or Moses, now?

Chapter 10 - Triumph and Trials...

As the sparks from their campfires rose giddily to the heavens that night, so did their voices in song to the Lord's incredible victory. At the centre of the happy throng, Aaron's sister Miriam danced and banged her tambourine, singing out for all to hear:

"Sing to the Lord for coming to our rescue
For hurling our enemy into the sea."

As she sang and danced, other ladies joined her, adding verse after verse to the song until the air was filled with their singing and the dust swirled beneath their feet. They sang a verse to the Lord their Defender, another verse to the Lord their Deliverer, and another verse yet to the Lord their Warrior:

"One blast of his fury and into the depths
That boastful enemy sank."

They sang, too, of the Lord's never-failing love for them:

"Lord, who is like you among the gods?
Who deserves as much praise as you?
Who can work such marvellous wonders?
No other gods create awe like you.

Nations tremble as they see your people
Nations cringe when we pass by
To the Promised Land we're going
To God's mountain we will fly.

To the Lord who reigns for ever
Because of him we did not die".

What a night of celebration it was. But next morning they were up and on the move again, down through the rocky desert of Shur, where the party atmosphere rapidly began to fade because for three days they couldn't find water.

When at last they hit upon the shimmering pools of Marah, the leaders of the pack raced ahead and dived into the water, gulping it in as fast as they could. But seconds later there was an explosion of coughing and choking because the water was so bitter it was utterly undrinkable.

With their eyes bugging out and their faces turning purple, they turned on poor old Moses again. "Three days we've been shrivelling up in this wretched desert," they croaked, "and all you can find for water is this stuff?"

Moses knew he wasn't to blame, but what could he do? He couldn't suddenly change the bitterness in the water any more than he could change the growing bitterness in the people, so back to the Lord he went to help them out.

He received a rather strange reply.

"See that large log over there?" the Lord said, "drag it down to the water's edge and throw it in. The water will turn from sour to sweet."

Moses watched with interest as the log was rolled into the water. He waited until it popped to the surface and floated there a while, and then he sampled the water for taste. It was the sweetest water he'd ever tasted! His instant smile of delight soon spread the news that the Lord had saved the day yet again!

But it wasn't just saving the day that the Lord had in mind. He'd purposely brought the people to this bitter watering hole and cured the water, to offer them a challenge.

"I hereby make a solemn promise," he told them through Moses, "that if you faithfully follow my instructions, I will never let you suffer any of the diseases I inflicted on the Egyptians. I will be your healer and all I ask in return is that you trust me."

Well, who wouldn't want protection from sickness? It was a wonderful promise, and the Lord had just cured the water at Marah proving both his power and his intentions, so why not trust him and do as he said? But would they when things turned sour in the future? That would be the test.

They had no problems on the next leg of the journey, which took them to the oasis at Elim. Drinkable water gushed from twelve springs, and seventy palm trees provided shade from the heat.

Beyond Elim, however, it was all sand and rocks. Forty five days they slogged through sand and rocks. They'd nearly died from thirst on the way to Marah but now it was desperate hunger that was killing them, and there wasn't any food in sand and rocks.

But this was the test: Would they remember the Lord's challenge at Marah and trust him to solve their problems, or would they vent their anger on Moses and Aaron again?

It was time to find out.

They soon made it clear where they stood. "Oh, that the Lord had wiped us out in Egypt," the grumbling crowd wailed, "yes, in Egypt, where we had all the bread and meat we wanted. But you two drag us out here instead to die a miserable death in the desert."

So much for trusting the Lord to solve their problems! But the Lord took care of the problem anyway.

"Don't worry Moses, I'm going to give them bread, but with some clear instructions they'd better follow. Tell the people I will supply all the bread they need each day but they are not to save it from one day to the next because it will only last for one day and no longer. On the sixth

day, however, the bread will last them two days, so they can keep what they have left over on the sixth day to the seventh. That's all they have to do."

Moses and Aaron gathered the grumbling crowd and Aaron filled them in.

"Listen in everyone. First of all, you're wasting your breath moaning away to me and Moses because it wasn't us two who brought you out of Egypt, was it? I mean, look at us; we're nothing; we're nobodies. It was the Lord who got you out, not us, so complain to him. Better still, trust him. And why shouldn't we trust him, when surely it's obvious by now he's right here with us, fully aware of our situation and totally willing to help us. Which brings me to my second point. All that moaning and complaining you've been doing, he heard every word of it. And when you rudely demanded bread and meat, he heard that, too. And to prove he heard he's going to send you all the bread and meat you can eat, starting this evening and again tomorrow morning. I hope it's a lesson to you to take your troubles to the Lord in future, because he's the one taking care of us."

As Aaron was talking, the cloud that had been guiding them since they left Egypt, began to swirl and twist above their heads like a tornado. The timing was perfect! It was just the backing Aaron needed to prove his point that the Lord was close by and totally aware of their needs.

As the sun began to set, they got more proof he was close, too, as quails by the multiple thousand flew in out of nowhere and fluttered down on the Israelite camp. The meat-starved Israelites poured out of their tents and pounced on the birds with relish. Campfires were soon sizzling with scrumptious roast quail for supper!

After a grand night's sleep, the people awoke next morning to another surprise. It looked like they'd had a heavy frost that night, because the ground had turned white. All over camp people began peering and poking at it and asking, "What is it?" because they'd never seen anything like it before. "If you're wondering what this stuff is," Moses explained, "it's the bread the Lord promised. Go on, gather it up and try it. You'll need about ten cupfuls each."

To their amazement, those little crystallized flakes of what looked like frost, filled them! And the next morning there'd be more, Moses explained, so there was no need to save the leftovers. But many of the people kept what they didn't eat anyway, only to discover next morning it was full of maggots and smelt awful. The stench wafting through the camp made Moses very angry: Would these people ever listen to instructions?

The best time to collect the little flakes was in the cool of early morning, before they melted in the heat of the rising sun. On the sixth day each week they had to get up really early to collect double the usual amount because, as Moses had already explained, "The Lord has set aside the seventh day each week as a day of rest so there'll be no gathering of bread on that day. What you collect on the sixth day will be enough for two days, and don't worry, it won't go off. Use the sixth day to collect and prepare all your food for that day and the seventh day, and you watch, everything will be fine."

Moses was right. What they saved from the sixth day didn't smell on the seventh. There wasn't a maggot in sight, either. Nor were there any new flakes of bread on the ground on the morning of the seventh. "That's because the Lord won't be supplying any bread on the seventh day," Moses told them, "so don't even bother looking for bread on the seventh day, first of all because you won't need to and, secondly, because you won't find any."

But that didn't stop a crowd of them rising early on the seventh day to go looking for bread anyway.

The Lord was not impressed. “How long are you people going to ignore my instructions? I told you the seventh day is a day of rest - that’s why I gave you a two day supply of food on the sixth day - so why didn't you rest on the seventh day like I said?”

It took them a while to realize their needs were being met perfectly by the manna, as they called it, and it kept them alive and well for the next 40 years, as well. It was the only food they needed. The taste of it was nice, too, like a delicately flavoured honey. A jar of manna was also preserved so that future generations would know what the Lord had kept them alive with all through their desert travels. That little jar of manna stayed fresh and unspoiled for the entire forty years!

Chapter 11 - The Amalekites....

They were soon on the road again, heading toward Rephidim, but there wasn't any water when they arrived. Not a drop. What a perfect spot for another miracle like the one at Marah, or the miracle of the manna. But all memories of miracles were lost in the desert wind and Moses got the blame, as usual.

“Moses,” they growled, “it was you who brought us to this wretched place, so you go find us some water.”

“But don't you think the Lord's involved in what's going on here,” Moses replied, “so why are you blaming me?”

“Why are we blaming you?” someone spat, “Because it's obviously your fault, Moses. Why would the Lord do something as crazy as this? Would the Lord bring all our children and animals out of Egypt just to die in the desert? Face the facts, Moses, the Lord's not with us. This whole miserable mess was all your idea and we're all out here dying because of you.”

More angry voices joined the fray. The mood of the crowd was turning ugly. Moses knew he was in serious trouble if the Lord didn't intervene soon, if not sooner.

“What am I to do?” Moses cried, “Any second now they'll be chucking rocks at me.”

“Moses, Moses, there's no need to panic,” the Lord replied, “it's all under control. Just calm down and listen. I want you to walk on ahead of the people, take some of the elders with you and bring along your staff, the one you struck the Nile with back in Egypt. You'll find me waiting for you by a large rock on Mount Horeb. Hit the rock with your staff and water will gush out in a torrent, enough for everyone.”

To the elders' astonishment, Moses took a swipe at a solid dry rock with his staff and out poured a waterfall of pure, fresh water! Moses named the place 'Massah and Meribah,' meaning 'testing and complaining,' because as soon as another test came up all the people did was complain. They'd witnessed miracle after miracle and then said 'The Lord's not with us.' How could they do that? Well, from now on, whenever anyone passed by Massah and Meribah, the shame of the Israelites' pathetic lack of trust would be seared in people's memories again.

The Israelites' troubles were about to get worse, too.

Hiding out of sight in the crevices of the surrounding hills were hordes of Amalekites, a vicious band of cutthroats, who saw easy spoils in the unarmed Israelites down below. With brazen confidence they strode out of the hills and set up camp just a short distance away, in full sight of the Israelites.

There were no signs of an attack that evening so Moses turned to Joshua, who'd been eyeing the Amalekites' movements with great interest, and said, “Joshua, pick out some good men,

march out there tomorrow and attack these arrogant wretches. While you're out there fighting, I'll be on top of that hill over there with the staff of God in my hand.”

So next morning, Moses, Aaron and a man called Hur, clambered up the hill overlooking the battlefield while Joshua and his hand-picked army marched out toward the Amalekite camp.

Moses reached the top of the hill just as the front ranks of the two opposing armies got within combat range. He raised his arms high into the air, holding the ends of his staff in both hands above his head.

The Israelites tore through the front ranks of the Amalekites like a spear through cheese and the Amalekites fell back in disarray under the withering attack. It looked like an easy victory coming up as the Israelites kept pressing forward and the enemy ranks collapsed before them. But suddenly, just as victory seemed certain for Israel, the Amalekites rallied and came thundering back, and the battle now swung in their favour, instead.

The explanation for this sudden turn for the worse was simple. Moses could only hold his arms up for so long. When he lowered them to take a rest, that's when the Amalekites suddenly revived and took the upper hand. After a quick rest, Moses would then raise his arms again, and back came the Israelites. This kept going on, back and forth as Moses' arms went up and down, until it dawned on Aaron and Hur that if they sat Moses down on a rock and they held his arms up for him that Israel would win the day.

They were right. By sunset the entire Amalekite army had been routed and destroyed.

But the Lord hadn't finished with the Amalekites yet.

“Take note of what I'm about to say, Moses,” the Lord said, after the battle cries had died down, “and I want it put down in writing with Joshua as witness. I hereby state that I'm going to wipe the memory of Amalek clean off the map.”

Moses was so thankful for God's promise that he built an altar and named it, 'The Lord is my Banner.' If there was war to be fought with the Amalekites in future, the Israelites' fears were over. God's flag was on their side.

Chapter 12 - God's Covenant with Israel....

There was a nice surprise waiting for Moses after the battle with the Amalekites. He hadn't seen his wife Zipporah and his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, since the time he'd left them all with Jethro, while he and Aaron set off to face Pharaoh. But suddenly there they all were. Moses was overjoyed. He could hardly wait to tell them what had happened.

When he finished telling them, Jethro stood up and cheered! “What a mighty powerful Lord he is,” Jethro cried, “and did he ever teach those arrogant Egyptians a thing or two! He just ripped Israel out of there, right out from under their haughty Egyptian noses, too. What a marvellous story!”

Jethro was so taken with what the Lord had done, he sacrificed several animals and invited Aaron and all the elders of Israel to the huge feast that followed, to bask in the Lord being so close to them.

Next morning, Jethro watched Moses at work. Poor Moses, he thought, all these people lined up from morning 'til evening seeking his help in settling their disputes, and how long it all takes and how weary Moses looks. So, that evening he had a talk with Moses.

“What are you doing to yourself, my boy? There you were, all on your own without any help whatsoever, surrounded by people all day long. Look at you, you're exhausted.”

“But what else can I do?” Moses replied, “The people keep coming to me. They get themselves into difficulties with each other so I have to decide who’s right and who’s wrong and show them which laws and statutes apply to their situation, so they know what to do and how to behave.”

“That’s all well and good,” Jethro replied, “but at the pace you’re going you’re going to wear yourself out, not to mention wearing out the people who have to wait so long in line to talk to you. Try sharing the load a bit. Find some good, honest men to help you. Give some of them a thousand people to look after, some of them a hundred, some fifty and so on. The people can go to them for advice. Only the really difficult cases come to you. You won’t burn out, and the people will be better served, too.”

Jethro was right. His advice worked wonderfully. Moses could now concentrate his attention on the journey ahead, so they left Rephidim and its ugly memories behind and pitched their tents at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Soon after their arrival, Moses went up the mountain, where the Lord had arranged to meet him to pass on a very special message for Israel.

This was the message: “You’ve all seen with your very own eyes what I did to Egypt and how I carried the sons of Jacob on eagles’ wings to this very spot. The reason I brought you here is to tell you this, that if you Israelites listen to me and follow my instructions, you will become my most treasured possession on earth. The whole earth is mine, but it’s you I choose. I choose you and you alone to be my precious people, my holy nation and my kingdom of priests.”

Moses hurried down the mountain to pass on the wonderful news. The Israelites were delighted! “Whatever the Lord tells us to do, we will do,” they cried out.

Moses then hurried back up the mountain to report to the Lord that the people had enthusiastically agreed to his terms.

“Good,” the Lord said, “then I’m on my way down to talk to you in person next. I’ll come in a dark cloud, settle over the mountain and start speaking to you. The people will be so astounded at hearing me speaking to you directly, they’ll really think you’re worth trusting! So get back down to them and tell them to wash their clothes and stay away from their women, because on the third day from today, that’s when I’m coming. And warn them, that if you catch any of them trying to climb the mountain or even touching the bottom of it, you have my permission to kill them - and that goes for their animals, as well. But don’t you go too close to the mountain yourself, either. If you have to kill someone, don’t touch him. Hit him from a distance with stones or a spear. But also tell them, that if they’re willing to wait ‘til the ram’s horn sounds, they can climb the mountain all they want, but not until then.”

For the next two days, they got the camp ready for the Lord’s arrival. And then, suddenly, at dawn on the third day, a blinding bolt of lightning split the sky apart and the silence was shattered by a splintering crash of thunder. A huge black boiling cloud hovered over the mountain spilling out more terrifying bolts of lightning and fearsome thunder-claps. And if that wasn’t enough to weaken the strongest knees, the trumpet blast that followed certainly was. The whole camp wobbled with fear as they shuffled nervously after Moses to the foot of the fuming mountain to meet their God.

Fire lit up the sky as the Lord descended, covering the mountain in a thick pall of smoke, while the trumpet blast grew louder and louder. As the Lord touched down on the mountaintop, the earth shook and a mighty thunderous roar rent the air as he summoned Moses to come and meet him.

Despite the fearsome racket and boulders bouncing down the mountainside, Moses managed to weave his way up the mountain, only to be told by the Lord in another rumbling roar that he'd better get right back down again to stop anyone following him.

"I don't want anybody trying to force their way up here to take a look at me, because if they try, they die," he said.

"But the people wouldn't dare climb the mountain," Moses replied, "because you told us already that the mountain was holy and we'd better keep it that way, or else."

"Go down anyway," the Lord replied, "and fetch Aaron because I want him up here, too. But warn the rest of the priests and the people not to follow you, or they're in deep trouble from me."

The people, however, were in no mood to follow. They'd been steadily retreating, driven back by the constant scream of the trumpet blast, the roar of God's voice and the smoke billowing out of the mountainside whenever lightning struck.

Who in his right mind would want to look at God when his voice alone was enough to kill them? The noise was so bad, that when Moses arrived back to warn them, the people begged him to do the speaking in future, not the Lord because they simply couldn't take it anymore. "But there's nothing to be afraid of," Moses shouted, between explosions, "God's only doing all this so you respect him enough not to disobey him."

Oh, they respected him all right, at least at that point in time they did. They weren't about to go near the mountain, let alone follow anyone up it.

Moses and Aaron surveyed the cringing crowd for a few more moments, then turned and climbed back through the swirling smoke to the dark cloud where God was.

When they arrived, the Lord was ready and waiting with another message in his thunderous rumble. "Moses, remind the people that I came from heaven itself today to talk to you. I hope they realize now that I am real. I'm also very close to them, and I'll bless them if they trust and obey me. They won't need other gods to bless them, like those little fake gods they make out of silver and gold, because I will take care of all their needs. And there's no need for them to get elaborate in their worship of me, either - they can sacrifice to me on the simplest of altars; rough stone or earth, both are fine with me. Don't get fancy with special sculptures or make the altar so high and mighty you have to climb stairs to get to it - besides, someone down below might look up your kilt and see your private parts!"

Chapter 13 - The 10 Commandments and other laws....

The Lord then got to the heart of the Covenant, the 10 Commandments, which he would later inscribe on two stone tablets. "Remember who I am," he said, by way of introduction, "I'm the one who rescued you out of slavery, so:

Number One: Don't trust other gods.

Number Two: Don't create gods out of things you see on earth or imagine in heaven. Follow me and me alone because I'm a jealous God and I don't take rejection lightly. If you do reject me for other gods, I'll punish your children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and yes, even your great-great-grandchildren if necessary, because that's how serious I am. I'm also just as serious about blessing the many thousands who love and obey me, too.

Number Three: Don't ever use or treat my name disrespectfully or casually.

Number Four: Don't forget the seventh day - the seventh day is very important to me; it's the day I rested when I made this world so stop all work on that day. You can work the other six days, just like I did, but rest on the seventh, and that includes your children and animals, too."

Number Five: Love and respect your parents and you'll enjoy a good long life in the land I'm giving you.

Number Six: Don't murder.

Number Seven: Don't have sex with anyone but your own wife or husband.

Number Eight: Don't steal.

Number Nine: Don't tell a lie to get someone in trouble and,

Number Ten: Don't wish you owned what doesn't belong to you, like another person's home, his wife, his servants or his animals."

There were other laws, too, like treating your servants well. The Lord also talked of setting aside a place where people could run for safety if they accidentally killed someone. If they deliberately committed a murder or cursed or punched their parents, there was no place of safety for those crimes, though. It was the death penalty. It was also death for witches and kidnappers and for those making sacrifices to other gods, or for those having sex with an animal.

Causing injury was a serious offence in the Lord's eyes, too.

To injure someone in a fight meant paying the man for any losses he incurred and nursing him back to health.

To injure a pregnant woman and cause the loss of her child gave her husband the right to demand whatever price he deemed fit of the man who hit her.

To injure anyone a second time, the guilty party paid life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound and beating for beating.

The Lord had a few things to say about thieves and burglars next.

"When a thief steals a bull and either sells it or kills it, he owes five bulls to the owner, or two bulls if the stolen bull is recovered alive. If he can't pay up, then the man himself must be sold into slavery to cover the debt."

"If a burglar breaks into a house at night and the owner of the house kills him, the burglar has no one to blame but himself, but the owner gets the blame if he kills the burglar in daylight."

"If a burglar steals money or property put in the safe care of someone's friend, the burglar, if he's caught, pays out double the price of what he stole. If he isn't caught, the person protecting the property pays double, because it's deemed his fault for not protecting his friend's property properly. For instance, if you were to ask a friend to look after your sheep and the sheep was stolen while your friend was supposed to be looking after it, he owes you double the price of your sheep. But if your sheep dies of natural causes while in his care, or it gets killed by a wild animal, he doesn't owe you anything because he has no control over those things happening."

To the Lord, looking after other people's property was very important.

"If, for instance," he continued, "you borrow an animal from your friend and it dies or is injured, you must pay for his loss - unless, of course, he was right there with you and saw what happened. You're off the hook, then. But if you light a bonfire and sparks from the fire fly into your neighbour's field or vineyard setting fire to his crops and grapes, then you owe him the best of your crops and grapes in return."

"Or if you forget to cover over a hole you've just dug and a neighbour's animal falls in the hole and dies, then you pay the price of the dead animal to the animal's owner."

"It all fits the principle that if you're careless enough to cause damage, you pay for it."

“If your bull, for instance, kills someone else’s bull, then you should sell your bull and give half the cash you get for it to the owner of the dead bull. But if you knew your bull was dangerous and you didn’t keep it locked up, then you get the other fellow’s dead bull and you give him a live bull of yours in exchange. If your bull kills a person, however, kill the animal immediately, and if it’s well-known for its rotten temper and you didn’t lock it away, then you die, too.”

“You’d better not mistreat or hurt any foreigners amongst you, either,” the Lord continued, “because if anyone knows what it feels like to be foreigners, you do, because you were foreigners yourselves in Egypt. But that’s nothing compared to the blazing anger I will unleash on you for mistreating orphans and widows. If I ever hear them crying out to me because of what you’re doing to them, I’ll make sure you die in a war so your wives are widows and your children are orphans. That’s how important it is to me that you look after the vulnerable and helpless.”

“If a poor person desperately needs money, for instance, and you lend it to him, don’t demand he pay you back more than you loaned him, and if he gives you his only overcoat as proof he’ll pay you back, don’t keep his coat beyond sundown. How’s he going to keep warm at night without his coat? Have pity on him. I do. Give him back his coat before he gets cold.”

“And it’s not just the needy you should help, either,” the Lord continued, “help your enemies too. If there’s someone you don’t like, for instance, and you find his animals wandering around loose, take them back to him. And if one of his animals has collapsed under its load, don’t leave him to take care of it all by himself, go help him.”

“But there are some people you shouldn’t help, like liars and those who spread vicious rumours. Avoid them like the plague. And be warned, a gang of them together are a powerful influence for bad, so don’t go along with them when you know they’re up to no good, and don’t side with them when giving evidence in court. They’ll try to bribe you into supporting their case, but don’t let them. If they’re lying, speak up and say they’re lying.”

“Never let bad people get away with their lies. Protect the innocent, because why should an innocent person pay for a crime he never did? Let the good people win! And let poor people receive justice, too. On the other hand, just because a person is poor doesn’t automatically make him right. If he’s wrong, don’t feel sorry for him. Wrong is wrong, and people must pay for their wrong. If a man has sex with a girl before she’s married, for instance, he must marry the girl and pay her father the going rate for marriage fees in silver, even if her father refuses to let his daughter marry him.”

“If you’re wondering why all this is so important, just remember that you belong to me now, so I expect your best, your first and your finest in return.”

“I am your Lord, and being your Lord, I don’t accept any other gods. When you come up against other gods, don’t even let their names pass your lips. I’m the one you now follow and I’m the one who’ll take care of you.”

“And to prove it,” the Lord continued, “I’m sending you an angel to guide you to the land I’ve prepared for you and to protect you along the way. Listen to him as you’d listen to me, and if you do, I’ll trounce anyone who dares be your enemy. You’ll be up against all kinds of bullies, like Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I’ll put an end to the lot of them, I promise. For your part, don’t fall for their gods or follow their religious practices. Instead, wherever you go, rip down their idols and smash down their sacred shrines. Worship only me and I’ll keep you alive and well into a ripe old age, and no woman of yours will be childless or lose a child in her pregnancy, either. Not under my care she won’t.”

“Wherever you go,” the Lord continued, “the fear of me will go ahead of you, throwing

everyone in your path into panic. They won't all sprint off in panic, mind you, because if they all left at once the land would quickly go to waste and be overrun by wild animals, so I'll drive the enemy out bit by bit until you're strong enough to take over everything yourselves. Remember your part, though. Don't make any agreements with any of these people at any time. Throw them out of the land, because if you don't they'll easily draw you into worshipping their gods instead of me."

Moses repeated every word of the Lord's instructions to the people and they in turn solemnly promised to do their part. He wrote down every word the Lord spoke in a 'Book of the Covenant.' Early next morning he built an altar of rocks at the foot of the mountain, with twelve pillars, one for each Israelite tribe, and sent off several strapping young men to kill some large bulls for a sacrifice. As the blood poured out of the dying animals, Moses caught half the blood in some basins and the rest he flung against the altar with its twelve pillars, spattering blood all over the rocks.

Then he lifted up the Book of the Covenant in a blood-stained hand and read every word of it to the people all over again. And again the people yelled back in response, "We promise to obey everything the Lord says."

To their surprise, Moses then grabbed the basins of bulls' blood and started flinging blood all over them, too, shouting as he did it, "This is the blood of the Covenant which the Lord has made with you, on the terms written in this book."

With blood spraying in all directions, landing in little droplets on their clothing and their skin, they were learning that a Covenant between God and humans can only be made possible by the blood of a sacrifice - the book and the blood together.

Chapter 14 - The House of God...

With the Covenant in both book and blood sealed and completed, Moses, Aaron, his sons, Nadab and Abihu and 70 elders of Israel shared the incredible thrill of actually meeting the God of Israel in what looked like a sea of shimmering sapphire, as blue as the bluest sky.

It was there in the presence of the Lord himself that they all ate and drank together, after which the Lord said to Moses, "Come meet me on the mountain, I've got something to give you. I wrote out the 10 Commandments on two stone tablets for the people, so come on up and stay a while."

Moses now had Joshua assisting him, so he and Joshua made the climb together. Just before leaving, Moses told the elders, "You wait here 'til we get back. If anything comes up, like any disputes amongst the people, Aaron and Hur can handle them."

As they clambered up through the rocks, the cloud slowly dropped down to meet them, stopping just above the mountaintop. For the next six days there was silence, just the cloud hovering over the mountain and Moses and Joshua waiting below it.

And then, suddenly, on the seventh day, the mountaintop exploded in flame like an erupting volcano. To the startled Israelites below it looked like the whole mountaintop had caught fire. It was, in fact, the Lord simply calling out to Moses to climb on up and enter the cloud, which Moses did and for the next forty days that's where he stayed.

It was there in the cloud that Moses received the most wonderful news. The Lord was going to make a home with them, a real 'House of God' where he could meet with them, live with them and be there with them wherever they travelled. He'd already worked out the design of the house

himself, but the building materials depended entirely on what the people were willing to contribute.

The Lord had quite a list for them - gold, silver and copper, followed by violet, purple and scarlet yarn. Next came linen, leather and goats' hair, topped off with acacia wood, lamp oil, spice oils and perfume, and last of all, jewels and precious stones.

“And I've chosen Bezaleel to be the master craftsman in charge,” the Lord was telling Moses, “because everything he turns out is a masterpiece of design and workmanship. He does exquisite work cutting precious stones, carving wood and working with gold, silver and copper, but that's to be expected because all his skills come from me! So did the skills the other craftsmen have, including Bezaleel's right hand man, Aholiab.”

The Lord's House was really just a large tent, but what a tent! The walls were made out of gold-plated planks of acacia wood, lined with ten huge violet, purple and scarlet curtains, each of which had winged creatures called 'cherubs' embroidered all over them. Two layers of goats' hair canvas formed the roof and another huge violet, purple and scarlet curtain hung down inside the tent, creating two separate rooms, the 'Holy of Holies' and the 'Holy Place.'

Inside the smaller Holy of Holies only one piece of furniture needed to be made, a small chest called the 'Ark of the Covenant' which, among other things, contained the golden jar of manna, and the two stone tablets the Lord was about to give to Moses while he was up there on the mountain.

The chest was made out of acacia wood covered in gold, both inside and out, with two gold rings on each side to slide poles through for carrying. Once those poles were in the rings, they were never to be removed.

The lid of the chest, called the 'Mercy Seat,' was made of solid gold and attached at each end was a golden cherub. The two cherubs faced each other, their wings spread up and over the lid.

The design was not only beautiful, it was also very significant. “It is from this very spot, between their wings,” the Lord told Moses, “that I will meet with you and tell you all you need to know.”

Inside the larger 'Holy Place' there were three pieces of furniture that needed to be made: a small table, a candlestick and an altar. The table, made out of gold-plated acacia wood, was for bread and wine, with gold dishes for the bread and gold jugs for the wine. The bread, called the 'Bread of the Presence,' was sprinkled with a sweet smelling resin called frankincense.

Opposite the table was a tall seven-stemmed candlestick, shaped like a tree trunk with three branches reaching up on each side, made out of one solid piece of gold. The candles in the candlestick were lit every evening so that the Holy Place was always lit up at night. In the morning the candles were extinguished.

Close to the huge dividing curtain was a small box-shaped 'Altar of Incense,' also built out of acacia wood covered in gold, with poles and rings for carrying. It had a rim of gold round the top and a golden horn at each corner of the rim. A special blend of incense, the work of an expert perfumer, was burnt on this altar every morning and evening. The formula for the incense was so special to the Lord that those caught copying the formula for their own use were to be thrown out of the community.

Opposite the altar, at the other end of the Holy Place, was the exit.

Outside the tent, in the open, was a large bronze wash basin on a stand, called the 'Laver,' where the priests washed their hands and feet before entering the Holy Place. The bronze for the Laver was supplied by the ladies - from their mirrors, of all things! Beyond the Laver was a large square hollow 'Altar of Burnt Offering' for the sacrifices, with a large copper horn on each

corner. Everything for this altar was made out of copper, the grill, the pots for taking away the fat and ashes, the shovels, the bowls and the forks and firepans, too. Even the wooden carrying poles were covered in copper.

Surrounding the main tent and the space where the Laver and the Altar of Burnt Offering stood was a fence made out of tightly woven cloth, attached to posts with silver hooks. At the entrance through the fence the cloth was embroidered in brilliant violet, purple and scarlet.

Such was the beauty of the house where God would make his home with them.

Chapter 15 - The Priesthood...

Beauty, and the same vivid combination of colours, carried right on into the design of Aaron's clothes, too. As head priest serving in the Lord's House, Aaron almost glowed!

Fastened at his shoulders by two onyx stones set in gold, engraved with the names of the Israelite tribes, was Aaron's 'ephod,' an outer garment woven out of gold, violet, purple and scarlet yarn.

Attached to the ephod, over the area of Aaron's heart, was a small square pocket of the same colour cloth. Inside the pocket were two objects called the 'Urim and Thummim,' which somehow provided the Lord's answer when important decisions needed to be made.

Attached to the outside of the pocket close to Aaron's heart were twelve precious stones, each stone engraved with the name of an Israelite tribe. Whenever Aaron entered the Holy Place in his priestly clothes, he always took with him the names of the sons of Israel over his heart, as a constant reminder to the Israelites just how close they were to the Lord's heart, too.

Under the ephod Aaron wore a blue robe hemmed with little gold bells because if he couldn't be heard coming in and out of the Holy Place he would die.

On his head he always wore a turban, with the words 'HOLY TO THE LORD' engraved in gold on it, so that any Israelite, no matter how guilty he may be at the time, could bring a gift for the Lord, give it to Aaron and the Lord would accept it.

It was highly unacceptable to the Lord, however, for the priests to wear the wrong underwear while performing their priestly duties in the Lord's House. Wear the wrong clothing and they would die. Such was the holiness the Lord attached to how the priests were dressed. Holiness and beauty, hand in hand together.

At the official ordination to the priesthood, Aaron and his sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, were brought to the entrance of the Holy Place, where they washed and dressed in their priestly garments.

A special anointing oil made of spices, blended by an expert in exact accord with the Lord's recipe, was poured onto Aaron's head. The anointing oil had also been poured over every object inside the Lord's House, including the tent itself, and on the Altar of Burnt Offering and the Laver to officially stamp them all as 'holy.'

So holy did these objects become because of the anointing by that special oil, that someone just touching them became instantly holy, and so holy was the oil itself that anyone copying the recipe for personal use, or using it for any purpose other than ordaining a priest, instantly died. Holy meant holy!

Every day, for the next seven days, a bull was sacrificed for Aaron's and his sons' sins. They rested their hands on the bull just before it was killed. Blood from the dead bull was then smeared on the horns of the Altar of Burnt Offering and the choicest internal organs, like the

liver and kidneys, were roasted on the Altar, while the rest of the animal was burnt outside the camp. A ram was also killed and its blood sprinkled on the Altar but, unlike the bull, the ram was cut in pieces, its innards and legs washed, and after the washing it was roasted on the Altar for Aaron and his sons to eat.

They rested their hands on a third animal, too, another ram. Some of the blood from the dead ram was wiped on the lobes of their right ears, on the thumbs of their right hands and on the big toes of their right feet. Some was sprayed on the Altar and some was mixed with the anointing oil and sprayed on their clothes.

Only after all these things were done was the ordination complete, the Altar made holy and those who touched it made holy, too.

From that time on a lamb would be sacrificed as a burnt offering every morning and evening. The Lord, in return, would meet with them, live with them and be their ever-present God.

Chapter 16 - The Golden Calf...

A month after the Tabernacle was completed, the Lord told Moses to count how many men there were in all the Israelite clans aged twenty and over, who could be used in the military when needed.

There were 603,550.

Each of those men was then ordered to pay out half a shekel as a ransom for his life. It didn't matter how rich or how poor the man was, that was the amount he paid. The money collected helped pay for the Tabernacle. It took more than 300,000 shekels just to pay for the silver!

With one last warning that death awaited anyone who did not stop work on the seventh day, the Lord wrapped up his instructions and gave Moses the two stone tablets with the 10 Commandments.

By this time, however, Moses had been up Mount Sinai so long that the people down below thought he'd disappeared forever. A disgruntled group of them decided this was good enough reason to corner Aaron and demand something be done about it.

"What's going on, Aaron?" the spokesman asked, "Moses has vanished into thin air, we're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere and there's nobody around to guide us anymore. So come on Aaron, let's make us some gods of our own to guide us. What do you say?"

It didn't matter one bit what Aaron said. They'd already made up their minds, and Aaron either went along with them or he had one almighty rebellion on his hands. He'd better do as they demanded, he thought, and play along for time, hoping Moses would get back in time to put an end to it.

"All right," Aaron sighed, "all those gold earrings your wives and daughters wear, bring them to me."

That would delay things a bit. But in no time at all, it seems, a pile of gold from hundreds of thousands of earrings appeared, and the demand for a god began. There was enough gold, Aaron figured, to mould a sculpture of a male calf, just like the calf-gods in Egypt. So, that's what he did.

The people were impressed. As they gathered round the sparkling image, the leader of the rebellion turned to the crowd and shouted, "Israel, here are the gods that rescued us out of Egypt," which they all knew wasn't true but they cheered anyway and bowed to the ground in

homage to their man-made god. Aaron went to work immediately to build an altar and announced that the next day would be a special celebration to the Lord.

The people had other ideas, however.

Long before dawn they were up and ready. They prepared an enormous feast of food and drink and when that was done they offered sacrifices at Aaron's altar.

But it soon became apparent when the dancing began that this was no celebration to the Lord. The dancers knew their craft well, having practiced it at many a pagan festival back in Egypt. The dance was more like a play where every hand and body action was designed to arouse the people sexually. And as usual, it worked. As the day wore on the camp rapidly turned into one huge orgy.

The Lord, of course, knew what was happening.

"Moses," he said, with anger in his voice, "get back down the mountain right away because the people you rescued from Egypt have behaved terribly in your absence. They've been sacrificing and bowing down to a god of their own creation, a metal bull, and they're claiming this bull-god saved them, not me. But that's how stupid and stubborn they are, and they've never changed from being stupid and stubborn ever since they left Egypt, either. Well, I've had enough of them, so don't get in my way, Moses, when I vent my anger on these rebels and destroy every last one of them. I'll make a great nation out of you, instead."

"But Lord," Moses cried, "you can't do that. Why would you kill the people you just rescued? And think of what the Egyptians will say. They'll accuse you of bringing Israel out here to die in the desert, just like the Israelites themselves do. But if you wipe them out, isn't that exactly what it looks like? No, my Lord, don't do this. Think again and don't be angry. Remember your promise to Abraham, Isaac and Israel. You swore by yourself, remember - putting your entire reputation on the line - that you would make their descendants like the stars in the sky. And you promised that all this land would be theirs one day and forever. Are you about to break that promise?"

Moses' passionate plea touched the Lord deeply and he agreed not to wipe the people out, despite their unchanging rotten attitude.

Much relieved, Moses tucked the two tablets with the 10 Commandments under his arm and hurried down the mountain as fast as he could.

It was slow going. The tablets were quite heavy, and Moses needed no reminding he was carrying valuable cargo, crafted by God himself, written by his very own hand, and on both sides, too. He chose his steps carefully.

Joshua, meanwhile, had run on ahead but soon came rushing back up the hill shouting to Moses, "The camp's in an uproar; it sounds like there's a battle going on."

Moses immediately stopped to listen. "That doesn't sound like the shouts of warriors to me, Joshua, or a battle being lost. It sounds more like singing, like the camp's having a huge celebration."

As they hurried toward the camp, Moses spied the golden calf and the dancing and he knew exactly what was going on. He was so angry he threw the tablets to the ground and shattered them. He ran to the calf, knocked it down and ordered it to be melted. He ground the molten lump into a fine powder, mixed it with water and made the Israelites drink it.

With that done, Moses turned on Aaron. "How could you let the people be guilty of such a monstrous act, Aaron? What did they do to you?"

"Please don't be angry," Aaron pleaded, "You know yourself how awful these people are. They demanded I make them gods since you were no longer around to lead them, so I told them to bring me their gold earrings, I threw them into the fire and out came this calf."

Oh, out came a calf, did it, just like that, eh?

"Come on, Aaron," Moses yelled, "these people are totally out of control and now their enemies are utterly justified in calling them a bunch of primitive savages, because that's what you've let them become."

Moses then spun on his heel and strode to the main gate of the camp, shouting along the way, "Who is on the Lord's side? Anyone on the Lord's side, come along with me."

The Levites immediately joined him.

"Take a sword, each of you," Moses told them, "because God wants you to go through the entire camp from end to end and back again 'til you've rooted out the instigators of this rebellion and killed them. It may be your brother, neighbour or friend, it doesn't matter, just get rid of them."

Three thousand people died that day.

When the Levites stood before Moses, their grisly duty completed, he had some encouraging words for them.

"You've carried yourselves well this day," he told them, "putting God before brother, neighbour and friend, and for that God is going to bless you, by making you his priests."

Next morning, Moses tore into the people.

"You've really done it this time. I hope the Lord will forgive you and I will try to secure his pardon, but there's no telling what he'll do when you've sinned this badly."

He immediately fell to the ground and begged God to forgive the people.

"Making a god of gold was a dreadful thing to do," Moses cried, "but can you please, please forgive them? If it's within your will to forgive them, forgive them, but if it isn't, then I ask you to remove my name from your book of registered citizens and do away with me, instead."

"If there's any removing of names to be done, Moses," the Lord replied, "it will be the names of those who caused the problem, not you. I want you to continue doing what I told you to do. Keep on leading the people to the place of my choosing and my angel will guide you. But mark my words, I will punish the people one day for their stubbornness. And as immediate punishment for the golden calf, tell the people I will not journey with them in person anymore because I could easily end up killing the lot of them if they ever get this stubborn again."

The people were shattered by the harshness of the sentence. It created widespread mourning, and in a show of heartfelt sorrow for what they'd done, they left off wearing any ornaments.

The Lord responded by delaying any further punishment, if, that is, they stripped off all their ornaments there and then and never wore them again. And from that time on, that's what they did.

Chapter 17 - Moses sees God...

Before the Tabernacle was completed, Moses set up a Tent of Meeting, a literal tent just outside the boundaries of the camp. Anyone seeking God could approach the Tent of Meeting.

But whenever Moses went to the Tent the entire camp came to a standstill. The people would stand quietly at the entrances to their own tents and all eyes would follow Moses as he walked to the Tent of Meeting and went in.

The pillar of cloud would then swirl down to the entrance and remain there while God spoke to Moses. On seeing the cloud descend the people would immediately lie flat on the ground.

Inside the Tent, God and Moses would talk together just like friends do, with nothing hidden between them. Such was the case this time, too, as Moses expressed his concerns about the future.

"You want me to keep leading these people onward," Moses was saying, "but you haven't told me yet who it is you're sending with me. I know you're blessing me personally and I know I'm in your good graces because you told me, but I also need to know you'll keep on pouring out your grace and favour on me personally so I can lead your people well. So, please, be with me; teach me how you operate and help me think like you do."

"Well, you can put your mind at rest, Moses," the Lord replied, encouragingly, "I'm coming with you myself."

"That's wonderful!" Moses replied in turn, "because if you weren't coming with us, I was going to suggest you simply have done with us and leave us here. As far as I'm concerned I have no desire to continue unless your presence is constantly with us, every step of the way. Without you, there's simply no point in going on. And besides, how's the world out there going to recognize you're with us if they can't see you blessing us in marvellous and very personal ways that clearly set us apart as your chosen people?"

"You're quite right," the Lord replied, "I'll do as you ask, my friend, because you have my blessing and I know you well."

"In that case," Moses continued, "may I have proof that you're with me? Can I see you in your glory?"

It was a bold request but Moses needed reassurance that God was with him in presence as well as promise. He knew God's promise still stood, that the Lord would still lead them to the Promised Land despite Israel rejecting him for a bull-god, but hadn't he also said he wasn't journeying with them anymore? But wasn't it the Lord's ever-present mercy and favour that set them aside as his people and constantly assured them they were in his care? Was that glory of God's ever-present care now removed, then?

Moses simply had to find out because in his mind it wasn't worth the journey to the Promised Land, or even living in it, if the great God, in all his kindness and compassion, wasn't with them all along the way, as well.

The Lord understood.

"Of course you can see my glory," he replied, "and in person, too. Not my face, mind you, because nobody can look at my face and survive, but to prove I'm real and close at hand, I'll let you have a glimpse of me. Stay put on this rock here where I'm standing and I'll pass by in front of you. While I'm coming toward you I'll hide you in a crevice and cover you with my hand so you don't see my face, but once I'm past, I'll take my hand away. As I'm passing I will say aloud the word 'Lord,' and that's the moment you can look up and see me. You will then see what 'Lord' means."

It was a moment to be treasured. As the Lord passed and Moses got a glimpse of his back, it blasted through his consciousness that they were dealing with a God of immense beauty and goodness. This wasn't the kind of Being who'd simply leave them to die in the desert. This was a God of incredible loveliness and kindness, who'd stick to his Covenant no matter what.

And this was the Being who would be his ever-present companion on the journey, too. Moses had been asking and wondering who would accompany him, and now he knew.

Chapter 18 - Moses' face shines....

As further evidence of his kindness, the Lord didn't blast Moses for shattering the tablets of the Law.

"Just cut a couple more," the Lord told him, "and I'll write on them the same words I wrote on the others you broke. Have the tablets ready by morning and then up the mountain you go again, where I'll be waiting for you at the top. This time, come alone. Don't let anyone come close to the mountain, and get the animals out of sight of it all together."

There was a nice surprise waiting for Moses when he reached the top, because the Lord gave him another glimpse of his glory. He passed in front of Moses, pronouncing the name 'Lord' as he passed, just like before, but this time adding, "The Lord is a God of enormous compassion, mercy and long-suffering, forever faithful and true to thousands, forgiving every wrong and defiant act. But, take note, 'Lord' also means he doesn't let anyone get away with sin, either. He'll punish to the fourth generation for a father's sins, if necessary."

Moses immediately grasped where this was going, and he threw himself to the ground.

"Lord," he begged, "if, as you tell me, I'm in your favour, then please, no matter how stubborn and rebellious the people are or will be, forgive them and keep us as yours for ever."

"I will do that," the Lord replied, "and I'll make a Covenant promise right here and now, to seal it. I hereby promise to perform miracles on behalf of Israel, the likes of which the world has never seen. I'll do them right before your eyes, awesome things that will stagger the people you live among. If you, my people, do what I say, then in return I will flatten Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, clearing them all out of your way."

"For your part," the Lord continued, "stay away from these tribes. Don't join them. Don't even be friendly to them, because they'll always be trying to trap you in their own religious customs. So, when you enter their territory, demolish their altars and hack down their sacred poles and pillars. Don't leave any standing. You bow to me and to me alone, not to some other useless god. When I say I'm a 'Jealous God,' that's exactly what I am. I don't accept any rivals. And remember, if you mix with these people they'll invite you to their sacrifices to their gods - and try to marry their daughters to your sons to lead your sons astray - so stay well clear of them. And don't go making any useless gods of your own out of metal again, either."

"There are several customs you can and should follow, however," he added. "For every firstborn male child and animal you have, for instance, you must bring me an offering. For a firstborn donkey, you can bring a lamb for an offering, otherwise you must break the donkey's neck."

"The seventh day is hugely important, too. You must stop work on that day, even at the busiest times, like seeding and harvesting. And in memory of the time you escaped Egypt, I want you to celebrate a festival of Unleavened Bread in the same month you left, eating only unleavened bread as you did back then, and for same seven day period."

"There are two other festivals for you to celebrate, too; the festival of Weeks at the time of the early harvest in late spring, and the festival of Ingathering right after the completion of the main harvest, and for all three festivals I expect all the men to attend. Don't worry about them all leaving at the same time, because any non-Israelites eyeing your land while your men are away I'll either have dealt with by then, or pushed them far enough away to not pose any threat."

"And a few last points I want you to take note of, too," the Lord continued, "smaller things perhaps, but still important to me. Never offer sacrificial blood and anything leavened at the

same time; don't keep any part of your sacrificial Passover lamb overnight; always bring me the choicest first fruits of your crop, and never cook a young goat in its mother's milk."

"That's it, Moses," the Lord finished off, "that's the Covenant I hereby make with you and the people. So, get it all written down because it's on these terms and these terms alone that the Covenant stands."

Moses had stayed with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights, without need of food or drink, during which time the Lord rewrote the 10 Commandments on the new tablets Moses had brought with him.

When Moses headed back down the mountain, tablets in hand again, he had no idea his face was shining brightly from being in the Lord's presence so long. On reaching the bottom, he noticed that Aaron and the elders were very hesitant about approaching him. They seemed almost frightened as they stared at him. When told that his face was lit up like a hundred lanterns, he understood, and he certainly had everyone's attention as he read out the conditions of the Covenant.

When he finished reading, he covered his face with a veil and kept the veil on while walking round the camp. When he entered the Tent of Meeting to talk to the Lord, however, he removed the veil, and he also removed it when passing on the Lord's directions to the people. As soon as he finished speaking he'd hide his face with the veil again. Such was the proof to Moses and the people alike, that God's presence was with them. They could see it in Moses' face!

Chapter 19 - The building of the Tabernacle...

The time then came for Moses, still with shining face, to gather the entire camp together for the Lord's instructions on the building of the Tabernacle, with a quick reminder at the beginning to down tools on the Sabbath. "Caught working and you die," Moses said, "Don't even light a fire on the Sabbath. It's day of total rest, so take it."

"Now to the building of the Lord's House," he continued. "The Lord wants you all to have a part in it. He needs both your skills and materials. If you can and wish to contribute, we need gold, silver and copper; violet, purple and scarlet yarn; the finest linen and goat's hair; ram's skins dyed red, and badger hides. We also need acacia wood and oil for the lamps. From the chiefs of the clans, we'll need spices for the anointing oil, perfumed incense, onyx stones and other precious jewels for Aaron's outer cloak and breastplate. For skills we need craftsmen for the Tabernacle tent and all its poles and fittings, including altars, tables, curtains and vessels. We'll need experts in sewing the priests' clothing, too."

The pile of material that the people handed in was phenomenal, and all of it given willingly. Day after day it poured in. So much kept coming in that those put to work doing the construction had to approach Moses to tell the people to stop! They had way more than they needed, even the expensive items like jewels, spices, oils and perfumes.

Two men were given the job of supervising construction and training craftsmen - Hur's grandson Bezaleel, and Aholiab. Whatever ingenious skill was needed, these two men had it. They could smelt metals, cut and set precious stones, carve intricate designs in wood, engrave, embroider and weave. To the very last detail they followed the Lord's instructions.

The craftsmanship was simply outstanding. When the job was finished and Moses made his final inspection, he was deeply moved and thanked the people over and over again for a job extremely well done.

The Lord then instructed Moses to start setting up the Tabernacle, ready for operation. It took a whole month to erect the main tent, put all the furnishings in place and anoint them with oil to make them holy. Aaron and his sons were also anointed in all their priestly garments, starting off a long chain of priests from their family who would continue the priesthood through many generations in future.

With everything ready to go, the Lord came in a cloud and covered the entire Tabernacle, inside and out.

Conclusion

At every stage of their journey after that, whenever the cloud lifted, that was the sign to break camp and move on. At night the cloud became a bright pillar of fire, so that day and night the Israelites could look up and know the Lord was with them.

But this was why he'd brought them out of Egypt in the first place, to grant this group of helpless slaves the chance to experience his very real presence. It had taken miracles, the blood of sacrificial animals, and enormous kindness from God to reach this point, but these were the people he'd chosen and loved, despite their glaring weaknesses and stubborn resistance.

And to prove he loved them, he had the Tabernacle built, so that he could live with them and be there for them every day. The cloud over the Tabernacle would be visible evidence, too, that he was always with them, ready and willing to hear them, answer their requests and bless them with protection from their enemies, and from illness.

These lowly slaves had become God's treasures, and as they came to realize that, they responded enthusiastically, in trust, appreciation and obedience.

Their days of fear and slavery were over. They were about to enter a new life - and in the not too distant future, a new land, as well.

Note: The saga continues in the books of ***Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy*** - where Israel learns many laws and many lessons, that teach them much about God - and about themselves.