

Chapter Eight

Who's Moses, Miss?

Several hundred years have passed, and Jacob's family is still in Egypt. Things are not going well. They are now a slave nation. Their very existence is at stake. This is the time that God is going to step in and rescue them.

Now -in a broom cupboard in Pharaoh's palace:

'Lunch!' The snake woke up abruptly from her siesta as a large green frog hopped into the room.

'Seconds!' she gurgled a moment later, as another frog hopped in.

'Thirds! Fourths, fifths! Sixths? You can have too much of a good thing,' she said in alarm. More frogs were leaping in through the open door of a broom cupboard in the palace of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, where the snake had lain coiled asleep in the torpid midday heat. Soon her home was stocked and stacked with green frogs. Like a jet-propelled hoopla, the snake launched herself at the door, successfully looping herself over the handle. An undulating green flood of frogs was washing through the wide corridor outside. Quickly she flung herself back into the cupboard, dragging the door closed behind her.

'What are you all doing here?'

'We don't know,' said the frogs.

'Did Moses send you?' asked the snake suspiciously.

'Who's Moses, Miss?' asked the frogs.

'You don't know who Moses is?' said the snake in astonishment.

'Where are we?' replied the frogs illogically.

'Egypt of course. Pharaoh's palace.'

'Uh?' croaked the frogs.

'Don't tell me you've never heard of it! You've never heard of the children of Israel either, have you?'

The frogs shook their heads.

What a bunch of ignorant amphibians thought the snake. Modern Egyptian history was her subject. Normally she taught it at snake school every morning. But these were not normal days. There was an alarming lack of pupils to teach, as a large foreign snake, brought in by this man Moses had unexpectedly eaten most of her class.

'Are you going to tell us, Miss?' asked the frogs politely.

History! Politics! She could hardly resist prattling on about them. But the snake hesitated. Frogs? But it might be an interesting experiment. An educated larder! What effect would that have on the health of a reptile?

The snake made up her mind. 'Right,' she said decisively. 'I shall give you a short course in modern Egyptian history. You have hopped into the capital of a large, prosperous, powerful country in the northern part of Africa and bordering the Mediterranean. Egypt is dependent for its wealth on the great river Nile that flows through the middle of the country...' The snake paused: Life's too short. Hang this curriculum stuff. 'That's enough about Egypt. Now - the children of Israel. They're all the family of a man called Jacob, or Israel. He lived long ago in a land called Canaan, but he moved into the north of Egypt, into the area of Goshen, in the days of the great famine. Since then, his family has grown so much - rather like you lot,' the snake remarked dryly, 'that they have become a nation in their own right. Jacob had a son called Joseph. He was very wise and ruled all of Egypt, saving the entire nation from death in the famine. The Egyptians were very thankful and so they left these Israelites to live in peace. But, class, about a century ago a Pharaoh came to power who didn't think he owed anything to Joseph. He was alarmed at the number of these Israelites. He was worried that in a war, because they lived near the border, they would side with the enemy and fight the Egyptians. He decided it was time for a new policy towards these people.'

The frogs were looking sleepy already.

'Solution number one: you could kill the lot of them. Solution number two - turn 'em into slaves and work them to death. Which would you do?'

The frogs woke up. There was much noisy debate. 'We'd eat them,' they concluded, showing some independence of mind.

'I didn't give you that option,' said the snake crossly. 'The Egyptians made them slaves. They put them to work building a couple of big military supply cities in Goshen. They put cruel taskmasters over them to wear them out, but the more they mistreated these people, the more their numbers grew. Plan A was not working. Solution anyone?'

'Wipe 'em out!' croaked the frogs, with very little thought.

'Hmm,' replied the snake, 'I see Pharaoh and his people were a little more subtle and clever than this class. Politics is not just about power, you know. Consider economics.'

The frogs duly considered economics, without much effect.

'You need to think more like a snake,' she continued optimistically. 'First the Egyptians made these Israelites work all the hours of the day in the fields. They forced them to carry heavy loads of bricks and mortar through the heat of the day. They made their lives bitter. And on top of this, Pharaoh ordered two Israelite midwives to see that all the baby boys were killed as soon as they were born.'

The snake hesitated. She had to introduce another subject - Religion. The Egyptians worshipped gods of the sun and moon and stars; they bowed down to gods of air and earth and water. But the history of Egypt and the children of Israel could not be told without talking about Another - the creator God, the one who made the earth and sun and the moon and the stars, and who gave the rain and sun and all the good things that grew in the earth.

'I must introduce you to God at this stage, I think,' she whispered, in case any of the magicians of Egypt were outside the door with their ears to the keyhole, checking up on her.

'God!' The frogs beamed.

'You know about him?'

'Of course. Created the earth. Ever living. All-powerful. The creator of us all. Very good.' The frogs' smiles widened.

'Oh,' said the snake, rather nonplussed. 'Then we can continue with the lesson. These midwives worshipped God. They defied the Pharaoh, and let all the baby boys live. When Pharaoh summoned them back, they told him the women had their babies so quickly, that the midwives couldn't get to them in time! Pharaoh let them go. They say God blessed them and gave them families of their own. Cruel Pharaoh turned to his own people. He commanded that they should throw the Israelites' newborn baby boys into the river Nile. The girls could live. Now, how would this class summarise the situation?'

The frogs shook their heads sadly. They thought it might be better to take your chances as a frog than be an Israelite. At least a frog could hop away. There was no escape for these people and no one to rescue them.

'Ah,' said the snake, deciding to ignore the accurate but unscholarly summary, 'that brings us neatly to the next subject we must cover. The life, so far, of the man Moses. Settle down and listen.'

'A story?' enquired the frogs, hopefully. Politics seemed such an unpleasant subject.

'A story,' sighed the snake. 'One day a couple of Israelites had a baby boy who seemed to be somehow, special. They believed God wanted the baby saved. The mother hid the boy for three months. Then she made a little reed boat coated with tar, placed her baby in it, and floated it amongst the reeds along the river Nile, at the spot where Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe. As the princess walked along the bank, she saw the boat and sent one of her maids to rescue it. She found little Moses inside, crying. She loved him. Moses' sister had been hiding, watching. She ran to the princess and asked her if she wanted a nurse to look after the baby for her, which, class, is just what the princess wanted. So the little girl rushed home to fetch Moses' real mother and the princess asked the mother to look after the baby till he was weaned. When Moses was a little older, his mother brought him back to the princess and Moses became her adopted son. He was brought up in the court of the Pharaoh and given all the education of an Egyptian prince. But after many years serving the Pharaoh, eventually he became unhappy being known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He wanted to follow the God, and to be with his own people, even if it meant giving up the high life and parting with his wealth and position. When he was about forty, he went to see his people and saw for himself the terrible conditions they were under. Whilst he was there, he saw an Egyptian striking one of them to the ground. He looked round to see if anyone was watching and then killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand.'

'Expect he wanted to save his people,' interrupted the frogs.

'Yes he did. But the Israelites rejected him.'

'Got to do things in God's time,' said the frogs, who appeared to know a lot more about the subject than the snake.

The snake ignored the contribution from the class and continued. 'When Pharaoh heard about it, he sent orders to have Moses arrested and executed. Moses ran for his life. He didn't stop till he reached a place called Midian in the Sinai peninsula. He stayed for forty years, working as a shepherd. Back here, the Pharaoh died.' The snake shrugged what might be her shoulders if she had any. 'It just meant a new one ruled, and nothing changed for these Israelites. From morning to night they groaned under their misery of slavery.' The snake paused for a moment. 'But the time has come for God to rescue them.'

'Oh, good!' exclaimed the frogs, brightening up.

'Now, class, how would you rescue them?'

'Send for Moses, Miss!' the frogs shouted, happy to have an easy question to answer.

'That's a start, I suppose, and that was what God did. The way he did it was, well, slightly unusual.' The snake cleared her throat. 'One day, Moses was sitting, watching the sheep, when he looked up and saw a bush on fire. The flames leapt up to the sky, but the bush didn't seem to burn up. He walked over – he's got to take a look at this – wouldn't you...'

The frogs shook their heads. They would have manned the water hoses.

The snake ignored them. 'Suddenly, from this ever-blazing bush, God spoke to him. Moses was terrified. God told him he had seen how the Egyptians were treating his people and felt their pain. He'd heard their desperate cries for freedom. He'd come to deliver them and take them back to a wonderful land. He was going to send Moses to lead them there. What did Moses say?'

'YES!' yelled the frogs.

The snake shook her head. 'Wrong.' Sometimes it was hard to understand the human race. 'He didn't want to go and came up with a pile of excuses: He said he wasn't the right person for the job. He said that the Israelites wouldn't believe him. They'd want to know who this God is. Then they'd say that God hadn't appeared to him anyway. So, class, how would you deal with this man who argues with God?'

There was a sea of green arms in the air. 'With kindness,' said the frogs enthusiastically. 'That's our God!'

'Right,' said the snake reluctantly, realising she didn't understand God either. Or frogs for that matter. Why didn't they want to wipe him out? 'God assured Moses that he would always be with him, leading the way. He told him what to say to the elders of Israel. Moses and these elders had to go to Pharaoh and tell him "Our God has met with us. Please let us go three days journey into the wilderness, so that we can offer sacrifices to him." God knew Pharaoh wouldn't let them go, unless he is forced to. God told Moses he'd hit Egypt with some great miracles. Then Pharaoh will let them go. God told him to throw his shepherd's rod on the ground. As it landed, it changed into a snake. God told him to pick it up. Carefully Moses grabbed the snake by the tail. Immediately it was turned back into his shepherd's rod.'

The frogs sniggered. 'Can you turn yourself into a rod, Miss?'

'Yes,' said the snake grandly, and with little thought.

'A real rod, Miss? Made of wood? Let's see it then.'

The snake hesitated.

'Come on, Miss!'

'I can't... Well.. I need a magician. Well... I have to be held in a certain place so I become stiff. Then I'm a rod.'

'Fake! Snakey's a fakey. Snakey's a fakey,' sang the frogs.

'S-S-S-S-SILENCE!' hissed the snake, uncoiling herself up to her full height and looking, she hoped, suitably venomous. The frogs became very quiet.

'Moses still objected. I'm not a good speaker, he said. I've got a speech impediment. God said he tell him what to say and help him say it. Moses still wanted someone else sent. God got angry. He could have killed him. Instead he told him that his brother Aaron was on his way to see him, and he would speak for him.'

The frogs looked worried 'Did Moses obey God then?'

'Yes, he did.'

'So Moses is here? In Egypt?' asked the wide-eyed frogs.

'Why, yes,' replied the snake.

