

Chapter Nine

‘Let My People Go!’

The children of Israel are slaves in Egypt. Moses has been sent by God to tell the Pharaoh to let His people go. Pharaoh has refused, and has made the lives of the Israelites much harder. Because Pharaoh refuses to let them go, God is sending a series of plagues on the Egypt. First the river Nile was turned to blood - now the land is inundated by a great plague of frogs.

Our scene - the broom cupboard in Pharaoh's palace, with some happy frogs and a one worried snake:

Singing and dancing is a rather energetic pastime in an airless broom cupboard on the hot afternoon of an Egyptian day. Soon the puffed frogs were sitting in rows again.

‘Good,’ sighed the snake with relief. ‘Now we have a little order we will continue. Now, Moses is back in Egypt.’

‘Yes, you said he was, but what’s he done?’ asked the excited class.

‘He’s seen the elders of Israel. They believed that God had come to rescue them. They were grateful.’

‘Were?’ queried the frogs.

‘Were. Moses and Aaron went to see Pharaoh. Moses told him that God said he must let his people go, to hold a festival in the wilderness. Who’s this God? I don’t know him. You’re taking the people away from their work, replied Pharaoh. The same day Pharaoh gave orders the slave masters that the Israelites must make the same number of bricks every day, but now they must collect the straw themselves. The Israelites had to hunt all over the country to collect straw. Of course they failed to make enough bricks and their foremen were beaten. They came to Pharaoh for help: Why are you doing this, they asked? It’s not our fault. Give us straw. You’re lazy, snorted Pharaoh. That’s why you want to go off sacrificing somewhere in the desert. You’re not going to get any straw and you will make all your bricks. Moses and Aaron were waiting outside the palace. Pharaoh thinks we stink, the foremen spat. He’s out to kill us all. It’s your fault. And they walked off. Now let me see,’ said the snake pausing to be sure, ‘what happened next...’

‘Oh,’ said the frogs confidently, ‘We bet that Moses and Aaron went off to see Pharaoh and when he asked to see something special Aaron threw down

his rod and it changed into a big long fearsome snake with wild green eyes and fearsome fangs. That's what we think.'

How did they know that it had been big and long with wild green eyes and fearsome fangs, the snake wondered? It had not been a good day for to be an Egyptian snake. 'Finished?'

'Yes,' said the frogs, meekly, seeing the irritated snake begin to sway slightly from side to side. 'Please carry on, Miss.'

The snake sniffed. 'Pharaoh was not impressed with Moses' snake. He called for the magicians. When they let go of their rods, they too became snakes. But Aaron's snake swallowed the lot.' The snake shook her head sadly. 'Pharaoh didn't care. He just threw Moses and Aaron out. They both turn up again, early one morning by the Nile, as Pharaoh came down to bathe. "God has told us to tell you to let his people go. You haven't listened. You are going to know that he is Lord. This great river Nile is going to turn to blood," they announced. Aaron lifted up the rod of God over the river. The water turned red. So did the water in all the irrigation channels, and the ponds, and all the water the Egyptian women had collected from the river for washing and drinking and cooking. The fish died. The river stank. Pharaoh called for his magicians and they managed to turn some water red. Pharaoh shrugged his shoulders, turned round and walked back to his palace. He didn't care. He left all his people frantically digging around the river to find some clean water to drink. That was a week ago. Now today you lot have arrived. I think Moses sent you. Amuse yourselves in here whilst I find out what is happening.' The snake re-coiled herself, then sprung up to the door and with one elegant gesture turned the handle, swung her body out, and closed the door firmly behind her.

Once outside the quiet of the broom cupboard, the snake was astonished at what she saw. In the corridor cursing servants were vainly trying to herd frogs out of the palace. It was quite useless. Egypt was covered in wall-to-wall frogs. Not only were they in the fields, courtyards, and corridors in every home, but they were in every room. Cooking was out of the question. Pick up a pot - there was a frog. Open the oven - frogs hopped out. Give up and go to bed - it was already occupied.

It wasn't long before the snake was back in the cupboard. 'Wake up!' she hissed at the drowsy frogs. 'There's no time to loose. Pharaoh has sent for Moses and Aaron and has said that if they take away the frogs tomorrow, he will let the children of Israel go. I've got to get you all back to the river. Otherwise you're going to die.' The snake was not going to loose her investment. 'Now, we have got to stay together. I want you in pairs in a crocodile, behind me.' The frogs shrank into a corner in a quivering green mass. 'In a crocodile?'

'Not a real one,' spat the snake impatiently. Stupid lot. 'One pair behind each other! Come on!' she urged. And with that, she led the way out, cleverly leading her troupe through the back ways down the great river Nile and safety.

The next day all the frogs on land died. The Egyptians swept them into great heaps. Egypt stank.

Once the frogs were dead, Pharaoh changed his mind, just as God said he would.

From a hole in the bank of the river Nile the snake kept an eye on her charges in the river and the happenings on land:

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One after another more plagues struck Egypt. Gnats covered everyone and everything. Then ugly flies covered the ground like a great black mat and ruined the land. After that, disease swept through the Egyptians' herds. The people broke out in painful boils. Then thunder shook the skies and lightning struck the earth. Torrential rain lashed the land. Huge hail destroyed all the crops and battered trees into pulp. And after that God sent an east wind that brought locusts. No one had seen anything like it. The ground was black with them. Anything the hail had left, they ate. Nothing green remained.

Egypt was ruined, and yet proud stubborn Pharaoh still refused to let the Israelites go. God told Moses to stretch out his hand to the sky. A darkness descended that was so thick it seemed as if you could feel it. For three days no one could see anything or move anywhere.

Pharaoh summoned Moses: 'you can go and worship your God. You can take your women and children. But you will have to leave your flocks behind.'

'We have to take our flocks,' replied Moses, 'every one. We don't know what we will need for sacrifices till we get there.'

Pharaoh refused. 'Get out of my sight,' he screamed. 'Never appear before me again, because the day you do, you will die.'

'You have said it,' responded Moses. 'Here is God's final message: At midnight God will pass through this land. All your first-born shall die.' Moses was white with anger. 'Then all these courtiers of yours will come and bow down and plead with us to leave. And,' said Moses with feeling, 'after that I shall go.'

Hardhearted stubborn Pharaoh looked at Moses, heard what he said, and, for the last time, defiantly stated 'These people will not go!' Moses turned on his heels and left.

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What am I doing here? the snake asked of no one in particular, as she peered out of the pitted wooden kneading trough in which she was hidden.

It was stuffy and smelly. Flakes of old uncooked dough peeled off the sides and irritated her skin. Worse than that, she, along with all the Israelites, was trapped. In front of them lay the sea. To the sides, mountains. And behind, Pharaoh's army was pounding towards them.

It seemed only yesterday that she was basking on the banks of the Nile. She had coped with the gnats, the flies, the lightning and hail, even the locusts. But then the awful darkness had descended. A rumour had drifted upstream that the Israelites had light so frogs and snake slowly swam and slithered up the river to Goshen, and into the cheerful daylight.

'Find out what's happening, Miss,' the frogs had pleaded 'We want to know what God's going to do next.'

Reluctantly the snake had wriggled away from the river, reaching the Israelites' houses as the sun began to dip to the horizon. The people seemed to be very busy. The men were slaughtering lambs. Then each one took some of the blood of the lamb and plastered it on the doorposts and the lintel of his house.

The men roasted the lambs over open fires, whilst the women cooked unleavened bread. When this meal was ready, all the people moved inside. Apart from a few wandering dogs, the roads and alleys were deserted and silent, whilst the smoke from the fires drifted lazily up into the night sky.

Inside each family ate hurriedly, dressed in their travelling clothes, as if they had to leave immediately. Yet when they had finished the meal, they stayed in the house, talking quietly.

As always, Moses had passed on God's instructions to the letter. Pharaoh still refuses to let us go, so tonight, Moses had told them, the Lord God will take the lives of all the first born in Egypt, but he will pass over every home that has the blood on the door frame.

In a cloudless night sky, the moon rose full and bright over the land of Egypt. At midnight, as God had said, the death angel came, and passed over every home in Goshen. The blood of the lamb saved the Israelites.

But in Egypt there was not a house where there was not one dead. All over the land a bitter cry rose up into that bright night sky. At Pharaoh's command, breathless, trembling guards hurriedly fetched Moses and Aaron:

'Go away. Take the Israelites and serve your God as you said,' croaked Pharaoh. 'Take all your herds and flocks just as you said. And bless me too,' Pharaoh begged.

Out! Out! urged all the Egyptian people. We'll all be dead soon, they wailed. Go! Go!

We're going! We're going! cried the messengers, as they ran from house to house throughout Goshen. Hurry! Hurry!

Now every family burst out of their house and hastily collected up their belongings.

The snake dived into the nearest hiding hole, only to find her refuge being wrapped up, picked up and placed on someone shoulders. So, borne shoulder high in an empty kneading trough, the snake found herself on the move, along with the entire nation of Israel. It was a night that would never be forgotten as an entire slave nation, men, women and children danced and sang, as they followed Moses out of Egypt to freedom.

God led them through the Red Sea wilderness. He was always there in front of them, guiding them in the day by a pillar of cloud and at night by a pillar of fire. Deliberately, he brought them to the shore of the Sea of Reeds, where they could go no further.

Spies reported their whereabouts to Pharaoh: These silly people had got themselves trapped! Why had they let these slaves go? And they'd let them take most of the wealth of the country with them! Pharaoh ordered his finest fighters to chase after them.

The children of Israel were terrified when they saw dust clouds swirling in the distance as the Egyptian army thundered towards them. First they cried out to God. Then they turned on Moses: Have you brought us out here to die in the desert because there weren't enough graves in Egypt? they shouted.

Don't be afraid, cried Moses. Stand still and you will see God rescue you. You will never see these Egyptians again. God will fight for you. Just be still!

The cloud that led them moved behind them. Pharaoh's men found themselves enveloped in a deep darkness. Though they searched, they were unable to find the Israelites. Yet as night fell, the cloud became a pillar of fire, giving light to the Israelites.

Moses gave orders for all the people to get ready in marching order, and then he stretched out his rod over the sea, just as God had told him to.

All night an easterly gale blasted the waters and carved a clear path to the other side. The unrelenting wind dried the sea floor into a hard straight road.

And so, with towering walls of water on either side of them, the Israelites fled through the sea.

The gloom surrounding the Egyptians lifted in time for Pharaoh to see the last of the Israelites hustling through the watery canyon. After them, he cried! Swords drawn, all of his army charged into the sea.

They had the Israelites within their grasp! But as they urged their horses forward, suddenly the wheels on their chariots began to fall off. The chariots bit into the seabed and dragged along the ground. The leading charioteers tried to turn. Run! they shouted. Get out of here! God's fighting for these people.

It was too late! As the last of the children of Israel climbed up to the safety of the shore, Moses, as God had instructed him, lifted up his rod. With a thunderous roar, the sea walls collapsed, in an instant covering all the army of Egypt.

God had set his people free!

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Whilst the Israelites celebrated their freedom, the snake snoozed as the morning sun brought warmth into the kneading trough. A green sea of dancing frogs glittered through her dreams. 'God is good. Very powerful,' sang the frogs, as they broke into a chaotic cancan.

'You know about him?' The snake had an idea that she had asked this before.

The frogs stopped dancing. 'Of course. Creator of us all. Ever living. Ever loving.' The frogs' smiles widened. 'Giver of life. Giver of freedom!' they added, briefly launching into a joyful but disorganised jig. And with that, the swaying, croaking chorus swung its way off the stage of her dreams.

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