

The Exodus According to G
A Unique View of the Biblical Story
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EGYPT

The Way It Is

Egyptland! Egyptland!
We must all live in Egyptland.
Tell me brother, do you understand?
We're all working for Pharaoh!
Pharaoh, he sits in his tower of stone,
The dogs called priests, behind his throne.
The magicians cry "Forsooth" — then groan
We're all just working for Pharaoh!
A thousand loaves, a thousand years,
He feeds us all, but he feeds our fears
Don't dare sleep tonight, my dears
Because we all have to work for Pharaoh!
Egyptland! Egyptland!
We all live together in Egyptland.
Now tell me brother, do you understand?
We're all here working for Pharaoh!
Pharaoh casts his glare askance
His treasures move through the eye of chance
But we're all stuck in the same old trance
'Cause we're all just working for Pharaoh.
The idols rise, tall in the sky
Pyramids, all speak the same lie
For we'll all work, until we die
'Cause we're all here working for Pharaoh.
Egyptland! Egyptland!
We'll all have to stay in Egyptland
Tell me brother, do you now understand?
We'll always be working for Pharaoh!

Introduction

In 68 BC, Thera exploded! It was a large volcanic island in the Aegean Sea, a northern extension of the eastern Mediterranean. Only a thin shell of the island was left, which today is called Santorini.

An important island trading civilization, that some have identified as ancient Atlantis, disappeared along with most of the land that had long been called home by a people who have largely disappeared. A distinct culture was snuffed out in that instant.

Most, if not all, of the civilizations that bordered the eastern half of the Mediterranean were disrupted. Some disappeared. Others fell into a rapid decline, sometime either at the beginning or just before the Mycenaean era of Greek history.

In 580 BC, Jericho was destroyed. According to the carbon-dating method of discovering the age of archaeological artifacts, a fiery conflagration coupled with probable seismic activity were the agents. This event occurred forty-eight years after the island of Thera disappeared.

Within the Egyptian “Kings” chronology, upon which most if not all ancient history dating has been based, an anomaly, claimed by some, has been discovered. This accidental misreading of the order of succession of the Pharaohs has moved the dating of most events, reliant on this system, ahead in time by approximately four hundred years.

A new reading of history afforded by a correction of this anomaly would make the explosion of Thera and the Exodus, as described in the Hebrew Torah and the Christian Old Testament, relatively concurrent events.

The close proximity of these occurrences is the basis upon which a new telling of an old story becomes possible.

Foreword

This story is told largely from the point of view of a Hebrew named Moshe who struggles within a system, headed by the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II, under conditions that amount to slavery.

Our story opens at the Project, a mud brick-making facility in support of the construction of additional grain-storage capacity located in the vicinity of Pharaoh’s cities of Pi-Ramses and Pithom.

The story also includes the following characters:

Pharan—an Egyptian overseer of Hebrew labor conscripts. He numbers Moshe among his charges.

Sari—Moshe’s beautiful, newly claimed wife.

Yigal—Moshe’s cousin who helps in the making of mud bricks at the Project.

Benjamin, Azareel, Naaman, and Rimmon—the crew of fellow workers who aid Moshe in his endeavors.

A commander of the Fourth Army of Egypt—located in the upper-Nile region, who has been ordered to report to Pharaoh in his delta capital, Tanis immediately.

Myserrah—a captain in that army, who poses a continuing, threat to Moshe’s life and welfare.

Youssaf—a haughty king’s courier who guards a closely held secret.

And Moses—an old man, who has apparently wandered in from the eastern desert with a message for Pharaoh.

It opens within the brooding atmosphere of an unknown environmental catastrophe that has just begun far to the north of the land of Egypt, the effects of which will devastate all the civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin.

It takes us through the several environmental disruptions known in the biblical account as the Ten Plagues of Moses. It also attempts to make sense of the initial southern direction of the Exodus, the parting of the waters, and the Sinain Sojourn.

While most of the characters in this story are fictional, the geological events have been documented.

Prologue

The Island

Catastrophe

Far to the north of the Egyptian delta, an island was entering its terminal agony. What had gone before had only been prelude to this, the final act of geologically visceral violence. It had started as an ordinary volcanic eruption, if anything of this nature can be described as ordinary. Then something changed.

The first puffs of steam and ash had alerted the island's inhabitants to the displeasure of their gods. Gifts and sacrifices were offered to no avail. Ever larger exhalations of steam and ash followed, accompanied by increasingly frenzied offerings of larger and more precious possessions.

In a final desperate effort at mollification, the most prized possession of all was offered. The future of the island community, heaped upon the altar of survival, was given up as a ransom.

The answer was plainly felt as well as heard. Earthquakes shook the island in rapid succession. With the ground buckling under their feet and new fire-belching fissures opening up on all sides of their beloved sacred mountain, spewing ash over everything and everyone, it became clear to all, including those who had offered up such a precious ransom, that their island was dying. Their awful sacrifice had been in vain.

Civil order collapsed as all means of escape from this great sea-faring island nation were sought and fought over.

A backward glance from the desperately struggling survivors, fleeing in all directions, brought the gristly vision of their homeland rapidly being converted to a gigantic pillar of fire.

Several times the angry seas rose up behind them as if to swallow them in midflight, then cascading through their midst, those crashing crests brutally shoved those who had survived each swelling rush, onward ever more swiftly.

The now almost-vacant island began to swell visibly as magma welled up from the bowels of the earth, pouring up the roots of the mountain to refill the partially emptied vent chamber. Ground fractures radiating from the shore allowed large volumes of the sea to pour in.

At first it immediately exploded into steam as it descended into the heat above the up-welling magma. As the pulses of explosions were repeated, the surface of the liquid rock cooled and became solid, forming a plug that stopped the upward advance. Pressure built up until the plug could no longer resist.

With the force of a huge explosion driving it, this mass of volcanic rock was flung into the heavens taking a large piece of the island with it. The explosion pushed the seas back from a

newly gaping hole in the island causing a huge wave to radiate in all directions. Again and again the seas poured back, the plug blew out, and the island crumbled.

Finally the seas cascaded into the enlarged chamber in such immense quantities that a plug formed so huge that the cap appeared to have become permanent.

A shaky calm descended over the shattered island as the belly of the beast rumbled ever more loudly in its distress. But the upwelling magma continued to strain against this new barrier.

The island shook anew, and pieces of it fell into the gaping caldera as this new restraint was tested again and again.

An irresistible force contended with an immovable object! No matter how rapidly it grew in size, the immovable object finally proved insufficient. Then, all hell broke loose from below, rocketing the vast earthen lid into the sky. With it, all of the island's central mountain disappeared.

Two immense tidal waves were generated from this cataclysm—one from the violence of the monstrous explosion itself, and the other, when with an overpowering roar, the seas rushed back in to fill the now gargantuan void. Finally filling, the sea rose up into a swirling, towering mountain of water before rushing out to follow its mate.

The thin ring, all that was left of the island, hung precariously over the edge of a now gigantic void with little visible means of support. Bit by bit a part of the remaining ring gave in to the force of gravity. Finally, undermined by the fracturing caused by the huge unsupported weight overhanging the abyss, the remainder of the shattered island plunged into the sea as one final wave towering above all the others rushed out to tell of its passing.

Chapter

I

Misery

Another day in the “pay” of Pharaoh. If one can call it pay, thought Moshe. More like indentured servitude, where the Egyptian overseer told you where to go, what to do, how long to do it, and what pittance you could expect to receive, according to the attitude in which you accepted it.

Needless to say trouble-makers were slowly starved into submission or to death, whichever came first, by progressively having their ration cut, and their work quota increased. Until the desired result is achieved, he thought.

On the other hand, compliant ones received food bonuses, however small, for living up to the ever-increasing work expectations.

Well, back to the hard task ahead, before the overseer has a chance to read my thoughts by the chance expression on my face. And then there was that ever-present whip to snap at the whim of him who was always there, usually for imagined wrongs more than real ones.

There must be something in the air today! Moshe thought. He could usually keep these sentiments at bay by throwing himself into the work at hand no matter how menial or miserable.

Today was kind of hazy, after yesterday.

It had started out with a gigantic thunder-head cloud appearing on the horizon, but as the day wore on it never seemed to come any closer, even with the wind beginning to blow ever more insistently throughout the day. But today, back to the ever-present heat of a summer day. Except for the haze, he thought.

I guess that's what I get for thinking that things couldn't possibly get any worse, he silently remonstrated.

Then that crazy old man, coming in from the eastern desert. Claiming to be one of us, he grumbled softly. Stirring up all kinds of trouble. How did he even get into Pharaoh's Court to make all those threats of bringing pestilence onto the land? Unless, they know he's insane, or they knew him in another way, as it is rumored. Anyway, he seems to be getting away with it, maybe because they fear his insanity.

But the rest of us surely are being made to pay for the trouble that he's causing with his big mouth. This thought stirred his resentment anew.

Ok, here he comes again. Quickly, smile at that Egyptian lout, bow to him, make him really feel that you like him, that you can hardly wait for him to tell you what to do next. Maybe you could even get out of this hellhole and get to do something easier for a change! What a thought. Nobody ever did, and probably no one ever will!

Unless, he mused, as he looked again at that hill north of the Project, the one he had looked at longingly so many times. If he could just be there, somehow, in some way. The "High Place" it had been called.

It must have been my mother, he thought. He remembered when he was little, he would see her just looking at it. The way I do now, he mused.

In his child's mind, he had thought if she looked long enough, she would disappear, so he would do something to make her look at him. Well, he thought, I never just disappeared either! And now, there's Sari. The thought lingered as he prepared himself for "The Visit."

Chapter

II

The Surprise

It's going to be another hot day, thought Moshe, as he reluctantly plodded down that well-worn, well-known path to the Project. "Well maybe today will be different!" he assured himself aloud, forlornly grasping at the smallest excuse to maintain a ray of hope. After all, yesterday had ended differently than it had begun!

He remembered again, telling his wife, Sari, about his surprise from Pharan, the Egyptian overseer, who had approached him toward the end of the day. At best, Moshe had expected a silent scowl, a word of complaint, anything but what he had actually received. A smile, a real smile, then a question, "How's your wife?" and astoundingly, "Would you like to leave a little early to see after her?"

Moshe could hardly hide his surprise. He had expected anything but good from Pharan. But is it? a thought intruded.

On the way to his shelter, he had pondered. Why would Pharan be so suddenly solicitous of me? And what'd he mean, see after? What was he getting at? What was Pharan after? He suddenly remembered, he hadn't seen him for some time earlier in the day, which was in itself unusual—and Sari had been late with his food.

"No!" he shouted, "I won't go there! Sari would rather be dead than—" He would put that thought right out of his mind. It is after all, a flogging offense for an overseer to be found with a slave woman. They see us as hardly more than animals anyway. But he had heard of other overseers who were known to dangle a small kindness in front of one of his charges, usually female, then expect a disproportionate response.

He desperately searched for a way to turn his emotionally charged thinking aside. This rarely happens to a man, he thought, but it had been known to occur. And what could be done? Even the slightest hesitation would be read as a no in your thoughts that would inevitably bring a lash or two. Well, he thought, it would take more than a lash or two to make me—

But no, he hastened to assure himself. While Pharan is many things, this kind of trickery has never seemed to be one of them. This thought, Moshe had decided, need not be shared with Sari. But then, had he just imagined a subtle, momentary change in her expression as he told her of this unlikely piece of good fortune? Or was it when he had asked, trying to sound casual, if she had seen Pharan today? And what is it that Pharan might have in mind for me? Well, I'll know soon enough! he assured himself, as the Project came into view in the distance.

Moshe had been so engrossed in thought he had been virtually unaware of a most spectacular dawning of the day. The sky was shaded a light yellow from as far as he could see to the south, graduating smoothly through orange in the part of the sky overhead, and shading through ever deeper hues of orange, toward a red that turned darker the farther north one looked. The sun was throwing great rays of its brilliant white light in all directions in the eastern sky even before it had broken above the horizon.

Beautiful as it was, it conveyed the feel of something ominous about it, or was that much more his imagination than something real? As the sun peered up over the edge of the world, brightening the sky to the north, Moshe saw again that same black cloud that he had seen yesterday and the day before, and it still hadn't moved, except maybe—Has it gotten a little bigger? Now, the redness in the north shaded toward the black of the cloud almost as if the two were connected. But that can't be, can it? A momentary thought flickered through Moshe's head, That old man, is he really Hebrew? The one who'd been causing all the trouble, threatening mayhem to Pharaoh's world. But no one's listening, because nothing's happening, is it?

As Moshe, and now others who had joined him, entered the Project grounds, he saw Pharan, the overseer, hurrying in his direction. Well, now I'll find out what I must do to pay for the small favor of yesterday! he thought.

Pharan, still walking quickly past everyone else, took Moshe to one side and said quietly, almost conspiratorially, "Something unusual has happened." Uncharacteristically, he shifted his weight from one leg to another as he spoke.

Pharan, nervous? Moshe mused, careful to not allow the thought to show through his face or actions.

"The barge with a quota of bricks from the Project," Pharan continued, "on its way down the canal, was somehow swamped and thrown up on the bank of the canal where it joins the river!" He looked incredulous as he added, "Nothing like this has ever been seen before! A sudden rush of water, they told me yesterday, like a tide. I had already volunteered to take care of the barge, but they didn't tell me how serious the situation was. This tidelike thing has come much farther up the river than has ever been seen before."

Something about Pharan's manner of speech and demeanor disturbed Moshe. Overseers didn't confide such things to workers unless they could somehow blame them for whatever might have gone wrong, and Pharan looked like he was about to ask for, rather than order something, from Moshe.

After a short hesitation, Pharan continued. "I've been noticing you!" His eyebrows raised as an uncharacteristic smile creased his features.

Moshe, at first alarmed, relaxed a little as Pharan continued. "You seem to know how to count very well!" He seemed to struggle with every word. "Always, when I've checked your quota

count, it has been accurate.” He hesitated and seemed ill at ease with this new way of addressing a Hebrew, a slave, and Moshe was as surprised as Pharan seemed nervous.

Moshe wondered, What’s this all leading to?

Having taken a breath, Pharan plunged on, “They told me that my gesture of volunteering hadn’t been necessary because the load had been thrown off the barge in an area, they considered, was charged to me anyway!” A sudden frown replaced the smile. “I now must somehow see to the load as well as all of this day’s work quota. I’ve been up most of the night getting the barge refloated. There’s been some damage to the load, but most of it just has to be restacked and recounted.”

Now suddenly, the old look of authority reappeared. “This, I know you can do very well, but it must be done quickly! I’m sure you will want to do this for me, am I not right?”

Without waiting for Moshe’s rather obvious answer, Pharan continued. “Now, take five others with you, but choose only those who will work well and fast. I will give you my seal mark so all will know that you have authority from me. Replace all damaged bricks with some of today’s quota to make the original count. Do this for me!” He now looked knowingly at Moshe. “And it will go well for you in the future.”

Moshe could hardly believe what he had just heard. Not only would he be going down to the river for the first time ever but also while in charge of others! Of course, it would be hard and exacting work on a short deadline. But, it would not be the same old thing in the same old way, all that he could have ever expected at the Project!

He couldn’t believe it! Something’s finally happened that’ll get me beyond the usual routine, beyond the project, even beyond that High Place. Exhilarating as the thought was, it also left a vaguely unsettling feeling.

Chapter

III

The Adventure

What a change in circumstances! Moshe wished that he could share this with Sari, to see the look on her face, for the first time, some hope in her eyes. But, that would have to wait. Maybe just as well, he thought, I have no idea what I might be getting into. Just one day away isn’t much, and then back to the same old thing. Well, according to Pharan, it might not be quite the same thing, but why me anyway? Why not someone more experienced? That look, was that his idea of a smile—or, maybe it had to do with something else. That miserable thought had intruded again.

Moshe watched as Pharan hurried quickly away. Already he’s off on other matters. He mused, If I do this like he wants, will he remember? And if I don’t, what then? No, Sari doesn’t need to get her hopes up unless everything goes well, and even then, who knows?

The question went unanswered as his attention turned back to the new assignment. What was it he said? Choose five others? Did he mean the ones I work with? There are others more experienced, but maybe he needs them here. Who would Pharan think would be best? Moshe wondered. Whoever I pick, we have to work well together, that’s what he said. The job has to get done even faster than Pharan thinks likely, or—Moshe wouldn’t let himself go further into that thought.

Well, it has to be my crew anyway, even if Pharan would just see it as playing favorites. I’m used to them. Most importantly, he mused, who else would be willing to take orders from me?

Then it struck him. Pharan had hurried off, not giving him anything to convince his other coworkers of his new authority. Who else would even listen?

As he hastened toward the group of workers awaiting their usual day's assignment, Moshe wondered. How do I convince any of the others to let me tell them what to do, if I can't even convince myself? After all, he thought I'm not even one of the most experienced ones myself.

"Look at me," he worried aloud. "Suddenly I'm an assistant to the overseer, and already I've got problems."

Once into the larger assemblage of workers, he could see several smaller groups close to his own. Well, he thought. I won't be able to get this done quietly! But then, all the others will probably turn me down anyway.

"Hey, Moshe!" his cousin, Yigal shouted, with a certain sound of mirth in his voice, "What secret did Pharan whisper in your ear, that he didn't want us to hear?"

Moshe saw a mixture of looks following Yigal's salutation. Many, with what seemed to be charged with a certain kind of wonder. A few seemed to show—Even envy, maybe? He tried to judge their looks, as he began to speak.

He dutifully related what had transpired. He was surprised to see them press closer as he went through the supposedly secret conversation. Some crowded in even closer around him and began to plead "Choose me, choose me, Moshe!"

The first part had gone much better than he could have imagined. All were listening with the same forlorn hope filling every face, hope that he'd felt so many times himself. He was already through his first test, passing it much easier than he could have thought. Should I just tell them simply that I choose my crew? No! he thought. But how do I let them down easy? he wondered as he looked with some dismay at the reaction, far beyond what he had envisioned.

But, they'd just have to understand that, his cousin Yigal had to be his first choice. All eyes were upon him as they heard the name called out. The looks that he got ranged from deep disappointment to sneering envy. "He's always been with me," Moshe tried to explain as some started to hoot their disappointment. It definitely wasn't going the way that he had expected.

He tried again, raising his voice above the noisy display. "He's always worked with me! He's young, strong!" he shouted to no avail even as he thought, And quick-witted, like I'm supposed to be!

Yigal proved his worth instantly as he bounded up to Moshe. "Choose the Mud Stompers! Choose the Mud Stompers!" he yelled. "They'll do anything for you." That was his favorite name for the gang of four who, along with Yigal, had made such a hardworking team. How long and hard they had worked together, mixing the mud and straw, pouring the batch into wooden molds, and, when dry, carefully knocking them loose and stacking them, and always trying to be the first to do the most. "Look at them, Moshe!" Yigal continued, waving his arms for emphasis. "Choose them and they'll do anything for you! You know they will!"

"OK! OK!" Moshe said with some relief, and called them out by name as he thought, How could I not? "Rimmon, Naaman, Azareel, and Benjamin. Quickly, now, we must leave immediately." And so they did amid a chorus of groans from those not among the chosen.

Chapter

IV

The Conflict

Moshe was relieved to get away from the unhappy faces of those left behind. He could well imagine how it felt, to have such a thing offered and snatched back away just as quickly. And then have to go back to that dreadful routine.

But the crew, now his crew, was ecstatic. On the way across the Project the next order came to mind.

Some bricks will have to be replaced, Pharan said. Moshe knew from past experience that bricks from the slower workers which didn't make it onto the day's barge load, had to be stacked for the next day of loading. Steering his crew toward the empty barge floating on the connector canal, next to the leftover bricks, he explained his plan to the others.

"We'll load these onto the barge now and take them with us!"

Let's hope there'll be enough to replace the bricks that were broken, he thought as he continued the instructions. "We'll be taking the barge with only a part of a load, and today's quota will have to sit until tomorrow, but that can't be helped. Besides there's no place for it to go down to until we reload the big barge."

They had just begun loading when one of the older Project inmates hurried in their direction, shouting, "Stop! Stop! Leave those alone!" Moshe looked up and recognized the rather officious old Hebrew as the one who normally took responsibility for the final count before and during loading onto the canal barge, but had only nominal real authority to direct others.

"Oh, oh, trouble." Moshe warned, as he thought, Old Ezra always comes in early so he probably missed seeing Pharan take me aside, so I suppose he doesn't even know about my new job.

Drawing near, Ezra continued, "Those bricks have already been counted against today's quota. What do you think you're doing? Now I'll have to do a recount!" he exclaimed peevishly, while waving his finger in Moshe's face.

He tried to tell the angry old man about his new charge, but Ezra blustered on.

"I'm taking you over to Pharan. Try telling him! He'll probably have your hide. I don't know what you think you were doing, interfering with important work!" he said as he grabbed at Moshe's arm.

Having deftly sidestepped the old man's thrust, Moshe replied, rather irritably, "Let's both go over, and you can explain why you are holding us up, old man."

They had just started to leave when a runner that they both recognized as one of Pharan's stopped before Moshe. Handing him a small clay plaque, he said "Here's the seal-mark Pharan said you would need to show your authority for what must be done."

Old Ezra was suddenly wide-eyed as he recognized the medallion. Moshe could see instantly that the old man knew that only workers with real authority were granted such badges.

"You? Him?" Old Ezra blurted out, looking from Moshe to the messenger. "What did he choose you for? What did he choose you to do?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Ezra! But you were too busy talking to take the time to listen!"

"He also said," the runner continued, a slight smirk curling a corner of his mouth as he cast a knowing look at the old man. "To tell anyone who tried to stop you that talking to you regarding the job that you're to do was just like talking to Pharan himself!"

Poor old Ezra, looking dumbfounded from one to the other, grumbled, "What's this world coming to?"

Having been thus deflated he slowly shuffled back to what he had been doing, shaking his head and mumbling again, “What’s this world coming to?”

Chapter

V

Discovery

As the last hod of bricks was lifted aboard the barge, the thought struck Moshe, We’re really going to do it! Something that I’ve never even dared to dream about! Beyond the Project! We’re going to see what’s beyond the Project! So it’s only for a short time, I’ll at least see what’s beyond the High Place.

While they were loading, it had been easy to see the barge as just another part of the land, another place to stack bricks. Although they’d never loaded a barge before, always stacking the bricks where Ezra and his crew could recount and load, it hadn’t seemed all that different from the ground that he had plodded over every day. Now he saw it as something moveable. It would take them somewhere. He looked at the others as they wiped away the sweat of their endeavor. Yes, they felt the same way, too! He could tell by the way they were looking at it.

Moshe was jarred out of his silent reverie by one of the Egyptian barge tenders, “Come on!” He barked in their general direction, “Get aboard! We don’t have all day!”

His crew scrambled past Moshe, trying, in their excitement, to be first. He had often wondered where the canal came from, although he knew, by conversation, where it ended, but the river had always seemed beyond his small portion of reality. This, he suddenly realized, was to be a venturing into a place which had previously been explored only by imagination.

Although he had been told of the barge’s destination, during those rare instances when he had seen the barge leave the Project he had always wondered if that was where it was really going. It would glide slowly away getting smaller and smaller until it would finally disappear. But now, to whoever else might be looking, he would be the one to get smaller and smaller.

It had always amazed him, how a single donkey, led by its tender, could pull such a load, even with the help of the start-up crew, who supplied the initial push. It had seemed an impossibility even as he would watch it, but now he would see how it was done up close.

At the signal from the Egyptian on board, the dock ties were slipped by the push crew and, with poles inserted into sockets in the forward and aft ends of the barge, they propelled it sideways out of the widened part of the canal that was the loading dock. That first movement gave an eerie sensation. He felt a tilt and had to take a step to keep his balance.

“Once in the current”—the tender, for the first time, spoke directly to Moshe—“with such a light load, there should be little to do.”

“Current?” Moshe mused aloud, as he thought, What’s that? With that simple question and the look that accompanied it, the barge tender pointed toward where the sideways push was taking everything and everyone. Water was moving slowly past them in the canal as they slid toward it.

As the barge entered the sluggish current, it began to move ever so slowly into the rather narrow-looking transport part of the canal. It was an odd feeling, thought Moshe, to be moving first sideways, then forward—to feel the tug of the line that was tied to the donkey as it began pulling and walking along the small path that paced the canal as far as the eye could see into the distance.

The current! The current! Moshe’s mind exulted as his eyes scanned everything so new to him. He had stumbled upon the real mover behind what had seemed so magical before.

“Of course!” The words were hardly audible, but they had brought a smile from the tender as well as a shake of the head.

The barge tender, who now introduced himself as Marah, seeing the looks of wonderment on all six Hebrew faces, seemed to suddenly realize that they had never been out of the Project before, at least not like this.

“We’ll have little to do for some time,” he offered. “Maybe you would be interested to hear what I know about things that happen away from the Project,” he ventured, looking smug in his superior level of knowledge.

To nods of assent, Marah, sweeping his arm vaguely to the west and also behind them, continued. “The Mother River, not too far south of us here, splits up into three main streams and several smaller ones called sloughs, which run through the lands north of us.” He pointed straight ahead, saying. “They spread farther and farther apart until they all empty into the Great Northern Sea. The farthest east of the sloughs, being small, was dammed a long time ago and diverted by this canal back to the nearest main stream, and that’s where we and this load will go. All the bricks from your Project, as well as others, are carried down this part of the river to make additions to the three grain storage cities, also built long ago.”

At this he seemed to squirm, as if he had been suddenly bothered by something. Then brightening, he continued, “Built long ago, by some wise Egyptian who figured out his Pharaoh’s dream to mean there would be years when much grain would grow and years when little could be harvested. In recent years, so much has been raised that many new storehouses have had to be added.”

Now this, Moshe thought, is not the way it was told to us! But he only smiled.

A sudden jarring bump interrupted Moshe’s thought and brought Marah out of his tutorial reverie. Moshe leaped to his feet, grabbing for the pole he’d just laid aside, rushed to the bow next to the tow line where the bump had come from. Thrusting the pole into the bank where the barge had grounded, he pushed with all his might but nothing moved. Yigal had followed close behind Marah, and seeing the tender apply his strength to no avail, added his also.

Meanwhile Moshe, seeing the barge was no longer straight in the canal, released his grip, instinctively moving toward the opposite side, looking for something to push with as he went. Rimmon, following Moshe’s new lead, was close behind. Seeing something round out the corner of his eye, lying by the base of the brick stack, Moshe snatched at it on the run and came up with another pole. Hurling it into the canal bottom near the other bank, they both leaned on it mightily but succeeded only in slowing the progress in that direction.

“Don’t let that end touch the bank!” the Marah shouted, sudden panic rising in his voice, “or we’ll be jammed!” Hearing the urgency in the tender’s voice, Naaman and Azareel sprang toward where Moshe and Rimmon strained on their pole, followed closely by Benjamin, who at Marah’s direction brought the reserve pole into play, jamming it closer to the bank behind the other. All now leaned on their poles with an urgency just short of panic. The rearward swing finally ceased.

Now an odd thing happened. The poor donkey had been nearly knocked off his feet and into the canal when the rope stopped moving. In regaining his footing, he at first refused to move. One smart snap of the whip of Pithios, the donkey tender, quickly changed his attitude, and he tried again to pull but without result. Hearing the shouting and commotion on board, Pithios applied the whip several times to the animal’s quivering flesh causing the poor thing to scratch the dirt with his frantic effort—but still nothing.

Now, in the anger of desperation, he swung a misplaced blow at the donkey that hit him on the shoulder causing him to shy to the rear, thus loosening the rope. Then, with another properly

applied, the donkey lurched forward with the strength of panic snapping the line taut again with just enough extra force to slide the bow over and off the mud.

With the donkey straining, Marah's and Yigal's push still applied, the restricted current gurglingly surged past the right side of the barge, easing the loosened bow back into the canal in the same general direction as the now-elated Pithios.

"Keep pushing on your side," Marah shouted. "We'll ease it over to this side and secure it until I can figure out what happened. The full barge never behaved like this," he added sounding more bemused now than frustrated.

With this done, they could then take the time to rethink things.

Chapter

VI

The Mission Resumes

Moshe and his crew held the barge tight against the bank with braced poles as a wooden stake was driven into the sandy soil and a stern line quickly tied to it. The pressure on the poles was slowly released, bringing the line up just taut.

"Watch the stake!" Marah cautioned as one after the other the poles were released. At first the stake moved in the loose earth as the sluggish current swirled slowly along the side of the barge, but finally it found its footing and moved no farther.

Hardly out of sight of the Project, Moshe thought as Marah called Pithios, the donkey tender, to the grounded side of the barge, beckoning Moshe and his crew to join in.

"It should have been obvious to me that with such a light load the barge would be pushed by the current much more easily than when it's fully loaded," Marah started off, looking a little like Pharan when he had addressed Moshe about his problem.

"Yeah? Well don't blame yourself too much," Pithios sympathized. "I can't remember a time when it hasn't had a big load." Then after a moment's thought, "Maybe we could hook the donkey line to the stern like we did the stake line and use him as a drag to keep the after end from slewing into the current."

"I'm afraid that we would move too slowly, and we would lose the steerage he provides that holds the bow over to the bank next to the path," Marah interjected.

Moshe wondered if it would be appropriate for him to nod in agreement, when he noticed Benjamin had already done so as he came alongside him while suggesting, "Maybe I could hold a drag line in the rear, and we could let the donkey stay on the pulling line."

"It might work," Marah observed without any obvious irritation, "but, if the current caught the stern like it did before, you might be yanked into the water before you had a chance to brace yourself. I don't think you could keep it under control by yourself."

"I'll bet two of us could," Yigal ventured, a challenge inherent in his tone.

"Now that's an idea." Pithios offered. Then, after another pause, "But I don't think you realize just how far we are going. It's a long way down the canal before we get to the river."

"I'll tell you what," Marah offered, a certain finality in his voice. "Why don't two of you try it out, and if you tire, your other friends can help you work a relay."

"What'll we do about the stake?" Yigal asked as he and Benjamin bounded over the side.

“Just leave it!” Marah ordered. “Once that you get the line loose, don’t let go of it for any reason!”

The barge was again poled away from the bank under Marah’s anxious eye. “Raca!” Pithios called out the donkey’s name as he urged him forward. Once again the slack was taken up, and the pull was resumed. The barge, responding slowly to the push of the current, began to swing its rear toward the opposite side of the canal.

But this time, with Benjamin and Yigal, setting their sturdy legs for a hard drag, stopped the initial swing. Then, with a lesser but constant pull, they held it in line, and the barge resumed its journey down the canal.

At first Marah and the remainder of Moshe’s crew stood around the deck with poles at the ready to assist in maintaining control of its direction. But after a time of this tensed alertness, seeing that everything continued smoothly, they relaxed their vigilance.

Now for all those on board, the opportunity to relax was inviting. Moshe, seeing that the others had already made themselves comfortable, slowly settled down again to the renewed anticipation of the easy ride that he had originally pictured this would be.

As he looked around, taking in the slowly moving scenery, Moshe’s glance settled on the donkey. Moshe recalled the name again. Raca, the donkey was called, and it was laughingly explained to be an old Hebrew term translated roughly to “fool.” Now, watching the small animal, attached to a rather thin-looking line, walking effortlessly along the path, while appearing to pull such a huge load, still seemed a rather ridiculous sight. But, looking at the canal, Moshe again understood what had been the real motive force all along, and he smiled inwardly. All had been restored and things seemed to be going well. Benjamin and Yigal on the stern line seemed to amble along just as effortlessly as the animal that led them.

On the other side of the canal a palm tree moved slowly past him. He had noticed earlier that they appeared to be evenly spaced, and as he gazed farther ahead, he noticed the palm-tree-lined canal wending its way in an ever more westerly direction. The trees, so orderly spaced on each side of the canal, marched off into the distance to where they virtually disappeared with no sign of a destination as far as Moshe could see.

I wonder, he silently mused, they couldn’t have grown wild, so evenly spaced, like they were meant to measure something. What a job that must have been!

He became aware again of the haziness in the air. It gave the appearance of a thin fog settling in over everything, except for that big black cloud. It rose enormously above all else. Studying it even through the haze, Moshe was positive. “Yes”—he found himself voicing the thought—“it has gotten bigger. I’m sure of it!”

“Huh?” Marah had heard. “I couldn’t make out what you said.”

“Just talking to myself about that cloud over there. What do you make of it? Seems to get bigger every day, but still so far away!”

“Yeah,” Marah answered with a frown that accented his already course features. “I’ve thought so, too. Yet it still doesn’t seem to be getting any nearer, just larger.”

Did he sound a little bit nervous? thought Moshe, as Marah continued.

“Maybe the gods are playing another game with us to keep us from feeling too big. On the other hand, maybe it’s a sign that these good years are at an end. It is almost seven in a row now.” His gaze drifted beyond the barge and seemed to carry him somewhere else for a moment, as he continued, “Someone down at the river last night was wondering if what had happened to the barge had something to do with the cloud. Last night I told him he was crazy. But today I’m thinking, maybe he’s not so crazy after all. It might even have something to do

with your prophet.” Marah continued, laughing at the thought, “He is said to have threatened to bring the wrath of some god down on us all.” He gave a sidelong glance toward Moshe.

“He is known to have said that he has spoken with his God, who in turn is supposed to have answered him from out of a cloud, and that’s a pretty angry-looking cloud.”

“If this God,” Moshe teased back, “needs that big a cloud to speak from, he must be one big god!” A self-satisfied smile creased the corners of his mouth as he further mulled the thought.

The barge glided slowly down the canal from early to middle afternoon. What appeared at first to be fuzziness on the horizon slowly turned into another line of palms rising majestically up into view. Their even march across the horizon seemed to announce that further progress in that direction would soon be blocked.

“It won’t be long now and we’ll be at the river!” Marah shouted, with some indication of relief in his voice.

And yes, Moshe mentally noted, Raca appears to be having little to do now, and the barge does seem to be moving along a little more rapidly. Not any too soon, he mused, as a breeze that had begun to stir a while ago began to push more insistently on the north side of the barge, urging it toward the bank. They were now traveling directly into the afternoon sun.

Having noticed this drift, two of Moshe’s crew moved to the south side with poles and began to offer resistance by occasionally pushing against that bank as the barge slid by. Their pushing became more frequent as the breeze increased in force.

“I think that I shall be glad to see our river,” Marah observed. “If the wind keeps picking up, it could end up causing us a problem.” He frowned as he added, “I don’t ever remember it doing so this early in the day. It’s usually been more toward nighttime. We certainly seem to be having our share of unusual weather lately.”

Chapter

VII

The Encounter

The palms ahead seemed to grow ever taller as the river came more clearly into view. The canal wended its way again toward the northwest as it, with little turbulence, disappeared into the larger flow. Even this smaller barge, Moshe thought, would be hard to handle out there. Then, to Marah, “We won’t have to go out into the river, will we?”

“No” was the quick answer, and then with a wave of his arm Marah enlarged on it. “See up ahead where the big barge is tied up? We’ll lash up alongside!”

It was a docking facility similar to the one at the Project, a simple widening of the canal’s left bank just before it made the turn that joined it to the river. Beyond that, Moshe saw a place where the grass and other small plants all lay bent in a direction away from the canal bank. Toward the middle lay a great pile of bricks, strewn as if from a sudden collision. Some lay like broken rays of the dawning sun radiating out from a chaotic jumble and all above an imaginary line as cleanly defined as if it were a horizon.

“There’s our work, what we came here to do!” Moshe called out to his team. “We’ll have to move really fast to get that all back onto the big barge before day’s end. But, that’s the way it’s got to be if we don’t want to answer to Pharan.”

Now Marah moved quickly to the bow. The strain of the effort to move the barge away from the bank reflected in his voice. “Move! Move!” He shouted as he struggled against the wind. “We’re almost there, we’re almost there,” he exulted, as the barge moved away from a sure collision.

As it neared the mooring, Pithios, his part in the journey at an end, stopped the donkey by a big anchor post where the canal bank widened. He transferred the looped end of the line from the donkey to the post. The line slackened and dipped into the water as the front of the barge approached that point, and then, as it glided past, began to take up the slack again. Azareel, with pole in hand, went quickly to the stern, expecting the barge to wheel when the front line went taut. But Pithios called back to Benjamin as the donkey was led away. "Loop the rear line around the post and let it pay out until the front line comes up out of the water! Then snub it down." Both lines tightened together, quickly arresting the forward motion. The barge now swung quickly sideways toward the larger one, bringing the sides together with a resounding thump.

The orders all day had been in Egyptian. With many of the words new to them, Moshe wondered how they'd made it through the day without a major mishap, but hand signaling had made up for the strangeness of these new commands. He watched as the two lines tightened together, arresting the forward motion abruptly. The barge now swung quickly sideways toward the larger one. He heard the solid thump that brought the sides together. With only a small recoil, it now lay motionless. The journey ended, now the work would begin.

"Well done!" Marah shouted approvingly to Benjamin as he and Yigal now scampered up the ramp of the big barge to finish the tie-down as Moshe moved off in the direction of the pile of scrambled bricks, followed closely by Azareel and Rimmon.

"Hathor's hair!" exclaimed Benjamin at his first view of the river from his newly acquired elevation. "It certainly is bigger than the canal!"

"There are two others to the west of us at least as big." Marah exclaimed, again revealing the smugness of his greater knowledge, his voice fading as Moshe moved away. The mental image of Marah gesturing again as he appeared to pick up his previous tutorial manner caused Moshe to smile.

"And another even farther away, and then there's the main river and two more after that, I'm told." His voice seemed to soften at the admission or was it just the increasing the distance? "Many barges use these waterways." He continued after a short pause.

"I wouldn't be surprised to see one or two before you finish your work here." His voice was now barely discernible as Moshe neared the pile. "Don't worry about the rest of the tie-down. You'd best be getting along after them!" The almost inaudible remark brought Moshe's head around. Yigal and Benjamin were coming at a dead run.

Moshe now led his crew through the beginning of a routine that, with only a few words exchanged, would transform the jumbled pile into neatly ordered and countable stacks on board the big barge. Late afternoon turned into early evening before Moshe called a halt.

During the short rest period, Pithios tethered the donkey close to them. The contented animal eagerly cropped large mouthfuls of the bent grass where the bricks lay strewn. Suddenly his head raised, and with ears standing straight up, he looked up the river, beyond where the canal joined it. A sail had just come into view from around a bend. It appeared to be at the head of several barges, all moving downriver, looking rather serene in their movement.

"What's that?" Yigal asked as Moshe stared intently, then looked in Marah's direction as he joined them.

"Hard to tell from here," Marah answered, picking up his tutorial again. "There are many kinds. They carry bricks, food and big cut stones. Some even carry soldiers!"

Moshe's renewed smile suddenly turned to eyebrow-lifting surprise. Soldiers? The thought somehow disturbed him. Why? He'd had no contact with soldiers before, only the look on the

overseers' faces when any possibility of contact with them came into a conversation. Was that the look on Marah's face when he had said soldiers?

"Do they ever stop here?" asked Naaman.

"This would be the time of day if they were going to," Pithios offered, a slight frown playing over his face as he spoke. "But all of those that are loaded with bricks keep on downriver to a construction project not very far from here. That's where yours would've gone yesterday if nothing had gone wrong."

"Well, let's get back to work." Moshe offered. "What we are here for, and what they might be about, are probably such different things that it's not worth thinking about." He hoped that he had sounded reassuring, their only worry ought to be getting done on time, and there probably wouldn't turn out to be soldiers aboard anyway.

As work resumed, the unspoken concern nagged at Moshe as he hurried back and forth between the stacked piles and the barge being loaded. He tried not to take notice, but found himself casting wary glances at the flotilla as it approached. Would it go on by, or stop here for the night? And why did he care anyway? But other anxious glances told him that he was not alone in his concern.

Breaking into the silence of their exertions, Marah observed, "The one with the sail has some markings." Straining to make them out, he finally ventured, "Looks like a crocodile standard! The Nile god-head, definitely military." A distant ram's horn sounded faintly across the expanse of the river between them.

"And by the look of the way that they are headed," Pithios joined in, a look of concern crossing his face also, "it seems like they'll be stopping here for sure. All on board have the look of soldiers." He added with a frown of apprehension, "Soldiers aren't always friendly!"

"I think," Marah observed evenly, "Moshe and I should go down to greet them where they land."

Challenge

Approaching the sloping bank of the river with Marah slightly in the lead, Moshe noted two spear-carrying soldiers were the first to disembark. Bronzed by the hot sun, clad only in short leather skirts and helmets marked by a single chevron. They were followed closely by another, obviously of a higher rank by the way that the first ones deferred to him. Hardly had he touched the muddy sand of the river edge close to where Marah and Moshe had paused, when in a loud sharp-edged voice he demanded, "Who are those barges assigned to?"

"Project number six, sire." Marah hastened to answer, adding a hasty bow of respect. "As you may see, they are being loaded with bricks for the construction site a short way down the river from here."

"Stand aside!" The words in a voice like the clash of metal on metal, came as an order. "I, Captain of Hundreds, take possession of these assets of Pharaoh, in the name of my commander for the use of his troops."

Marah, mouth agape at such an outrageous claim to resources vital to them, glanced incredulously at Moshe. Seeing this reaction, the captain shifted his glare slightly to include Moshe. It now took on a sudden quizzical aspect as he added even more acidly than before, "My commander, Captain of Thousands, proceeds at Pharaoh's direct call! He has prime authority to commandeer any and all means of transport to quickly move his army of the Southern Cross to Pharaoh's new capital at Tanis on the northern delta." As he spoke, the two soldiers stepped in front of him, positioning their spears at the ready.

Marah, still looking toward Moshe as if for some indication of support for whatever response that he felt had to be made, timorously began again.

“Sire! We are responsible for the timely delivery of these brick shipments that are vital in the building of new granaries in time for the harvest, which will overflow present capacity.” A nervous cough quickly followed, then, “We are even now late because of a disastrous tidal accident that has forced us to reload and send it on its way if we are to keep to an already exacting schedule.” Feeling good that he had gotten this far without interruption, he took a breath as if to continue, but even another small hesitation was too much.

The captain lurched menacingly forward, which automatically brought the spear-carriers from ready to guard position. He bellowed, “Lowly river scum, do you mean to insult me by attempting to compare feeding mouths to guarding borders?”

Gathering up his nerve, Moshe stepped hesitantly forward, aware that he must try to help Marah, by the exercise of his newly acquired authority.

“Good sir!” Moshe began, clutching at his medallion for emphasis.

“What is this?” The captain thundered, “A lowly Hebrew slave dares to address me directly?” With a wave of his hand, the soldiers knocked Moshe to the ground, pinning his head and neck with spear-points, while glancing toward the captain for further direction. The sharp edge of the spear points cut into Moshe’s neck.

A small trickle of blood rolled down toward his chin as he thought, Don’t move! Don’t move! He desperately fought to quell the quaking fear that clutched at his gut at the thought of what might come next. He heard his crew shout as they sprang forward, racing toward him at a dead run. His body broke into a cold sweat. He dared not move even to warn them away. What could they do in the face of what seemed like certain death, except die with him, and quickly?

He heard, more than saw, a figure, seated at the stern of the lead boat arise and rapidly make his way forward. Six soldiers arose close behind him. Those who had Moshe pinned instantly redirected their attention, lessening their pressure on his neck. The captain, turning abruptly, instantly struck a pose of subordination. “What would my Lord desire?” he meowed with exaggerated politeness.

The figure, whose crocodile headdress bespoke his high rank, intoned in a voice only mildly acerbic, but somewhat above normal volume, “We are not on a mission of conquest, but wish to obtain as widespread and voluntary cooperation as possible. Release this slave that he may respond to my questions and bidding!” He continued in an even more commanding tone and gesture.

“Now!” he continued, casting his stern gaze toward Moshe, who had slowly risen to a kneeling position, while still clutching the medallion in one hand as the other gingerly felt where the spear-points had left a trickle of blood still oozing. “You have some small mark of office. Explain to me what it signifies.”

Moshe looked up uncertainly at the lordly figure. With relief he saw that his crew had stopped and now stood frozen in place at the sound of such a voice of authority. He opened his mouth to speak. Again, the same soldiers who had pinned him lurched toward him rasping in a dialect of Egyptian that he could scarcely understand, “Head down! Head down!”

No eye contact! No eye contact! warned his mental faculty as it quickly interpreted the message. Once again the soldiers stepped back at the wave of their commander’s hand.

Moshe’s sweat, mixed with the mud of the riverbank, covered his neck and face as he carefully removed the mark of authority that Pharan had given him. For just such a purpose! he thought.

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