

Jasper



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Story of the day:

A Battle of Gods

The old man, his shepherd's staff in hand, stood in the great palace, glaring at the king upon his throne. He knew where he was, because long ago, when he was a boy, he had been brought up in this place.

"Thus says the Lord," said the shepherd. "Let my people go into the wilderness, to worship me."

The people, the Hebrews, were slaves in that nation. They had been set to work making bricks for magnificent buildings which they would not be permitted to enter. They were groaning under the labor and the oppression.

The king smiled. Who was this old and weak fool to tell him what to do? The king, after all, was a god. His title was PHARAOH, which meant, in Egyptian, GREAT HOUSE. That did not refer to the palace where he lived. It meant that he was the living head of a HOUSE, a divine family that came from many centuries before, and that would last forever. Or so the Egyptians thought. They believed that every chief of the divine family was a god, named Horus, and that when the chief died, he would return to the underworld, where he would be united with the father of Horus, the god of justice named Osiris (say it: oh-SYE-ris).



Why did the great Nile River overflow its banks every year, leaving rich mud behind when it returned to its riverbed, mud so rich that all the Egyptian farmers had to do was to throw seeds of grain on it, and they would get a full crop, for bread? It was because of the Pharaoh, they thought. Why were their granaries full of the kernels of wheat and barley, good and dry, so they need not worry about food during the winter, or in a year

when the crop was not the best? It was because of the Great House, the Pharaoh, they thought. What kept the grasshoppers away from the crops? What kept the cattle sleek and fat? What made the Egyptians rich and healthy, so that their women could spend so much

time making themselves beautiful, with lipstick and eyeshadow and other things like that, which the Egyptians were first in the world to invent? The Pharaoh, the Great House, the god, they thought.

"If you do not let my people go," said the old shepherd, "the Lord, the God of all, will visit you with plagues. Be wise, and do what is right."

"Do you threaten me?" said the Great House, sitting up straight in his throne, as a god would do. He laughed and sent the shepherd away. No, he would not let the Hebrews go. Did they have to make bricks? Good, let them make bricks, and let them try to make the bricks hold together without

straw. Let them make twice as many, too.

You probably know what happened then. The Pharaoh thought he was a god. Can you imagine a whale fighting against a minnow? Or an elephant, fighting against a flea? That would still not be a good way to think of God, the Creator of the whole universe, against Pharaoh, just a human being like anybody else, a man who had to eat in the morning, who got bitten by mosquitoes, who would twist his ankle if he accidentally stepped in a hole, who got a stomach ache if his fish were undercooked, and who would get old and die. Pharaoh was not tiny, compared with God. He was nothing at all, compared with God. He would not have existed at all, except for God, because God made him. But Pharaoh, the Great House, was like a brainless bull in his stubbornness, and he did not let the Hebrew people go.

So the plagues came. First it was the river: the water of the great Nile turned to blood, and the people could not drink it. It isn't just that the land of Egypt had a helpful river running through it. The only reason why there was any Egypt at all was that the Nile brought water to it and made life possible. It was all desert otherwise. The Nile was a god too, the people thought. That was not so. The Nile was only water. The Nile was nothing, to God.

Then came swarms of frogs, making everything slimy and filthy, and leaving a terrible stink when they died in heaps. Then came gnats, and

horseflies. Then came disease, ravaging the Egyptian flocks and herds. Then came boils, infections of the skin that swell up in hard bumps and fill with dead cells and germs – and this, for the Egyptians who took such tender care for their skin! Then came hail, battering the stalks of grain, and then grasshoppers, so thick on the ground that everywhere you stepped you would crush them, and so thick in the air that they made the day seem like night. They ate every leaf in sight. Then came

darkness – darkness, in that land where there is hardly ever a cloud in the sky. And then the final plague, the death of all the first-born in Egypt.

Only after that, did the Great House agree to let the children of Israel go, but even

then he changed his mind and tried to pursue them and kill them as they neared the shores of the Red Sea. But that is another story.

What the people should have learned from their deliverance out of Egypt was not that God was more powerful than Pharaoh. They should have learned that God was God, the only God, and that all other gods were nothing, and that human beings are no more than dust in the wind, compared with God. But it took them a long time to learn that, too. And that is still another story.



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