

## Chapter 11

### Negotiations at the Court of Pharaoh— A Stupendous Issue— Commencement of the Struggle

MOSES, HAVING obtained the ear of the people, took the next step. Accompanied by Aaron, he obtained an audience of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, for which his previous status at the Court of Egypt, in the days before his exile, had doubtless paved the way. The impending struggle between Divine power on the one hand, and the power of Egypt on the other, was opened gently at the first. Moses presented a limited request of a perfectly reasonable nature, even from the Egyptian point of view. The full extent of the Divine purpose was not disclosed at once. “Thus saith Yahweh Elohim of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.” The kernel of this demand lay in the authority upon which it was made: “Thus saith Yahweh Elohim of Israel.” This raised the issue at once—the intended issue—the issue involved in the whole Egyptian struggle. Not a question of the rights of the Hebrews—which formed a very subordinate element in the case—but a question of the authority of Yahweh Elohim of Israel to demand their liberation. The issue was immediately taken by Pharaoh. “*Who is YAHWEH, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go?* I know not Yahweh, neither will I let Israel go.” Pharaoh had never heard of Yahweh. If he had ever heard that the Hebrew slave race in his dominions had a God, he had never heard of him under this name: for this was a name specially assumed—a name by which He had never before been known—a name revealed for the first time at the commencement of the Egyptian wonders. So God informed Moses ([Ex. 6:3](#)), “I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty (*Ail Shaddai*—the strength of the powerful ones or angels): but by my name YAHWEH was I not known unto them.”

This is the name appearing in the English version as Jehovah: that its correct form is Yahweh appears to be beyond doubt. There is a tolerable unanimity among Hebraists on this point. That it is incorrectly translated, “I AM,” appears also beyond doubt. It is the verb of existence, but not in the present tense. This is established by several grammatical books recently published. Their contention on the point is certainly strongly supported by this fact, that in the very few cases where the same form of the verb occurs in the Hebrew Scriptures otherwise than as the name of God, it has a future meaning: “I will be (*Yahweh*) as the dew unto Israel” ([Hos. 14:5](#)). The writers in question concur with Dr. Thomas, that the memorial name of the Deity revealed to Moses was *a prophetic name*—I WILL BE—an intimation of the Deity’s purpose to manifest Himself in a personal form for the deliverance of Israel and all the families of the earth at the last.

However, Pharaoh had never heard of Yahweh; therefore he naturally enquired who he was, and declared he knew Him not, and what was more, should not comply with His mandate. Moses explained that Yahweh was the God of the Hebrews, and that the God of the Hebrews had

appeared to him. He repeated the request for permission to go into the wilderness to worship—limiting the asked-for leave of absence to three days, and urging as an argument, that might appeal to a pagan like Pharaoh, that the Israelites were in danger of judgment from their God if they did not hold the required feast. Pharaoh met the request with a decided negative. He upbraided Moses and Aaron for hindering the Israelites from their work, and dismissed them peremptorily. He then issued orders to the Egyptian overseers of the Israelites, to make their task as brickmakers more severe by withholding the materials heretofore supplied to them for the manufacture of the bricks, and yet insisting on the same number as before. The comment with which Pharaoh accompanied this tyrannical decree was very bitter for Israel: “They be idle; therefore they cry, Let us go and sacrifice to our God. Let there more work be laid upon the men that they may labour therein, and let them not regard vain words.” The people had no escape from this severe measure. Pharaoh’s officers said to them, “Thus saith Pharaoh, I will not give you straw. Go ye, get ye straw where ye can find it: yet not aught of your work shall be diminished.” The people scattered everywhere to gather stubble instead of straw. They could not make bricks while so engaged; yet the regulation number was demanded of them, and not being forthcoming, they were beaten. What a sore strait! What were the Israelites to do? They sent a deputation to Pharaoh. He received them. They said, “Wherefore dealest thou thus with thy servants? There is no straw given unto thy servants, and they say to us, Make brick. And behold they servants are beaten. But the fault is in thine own people.” Pharaoh only repeated the taunt with which he issued the order stopping the straw. “Ye are idle; ye are idle; therefore ye say let us go and do sacrifice to Yahweh. Go, there. fore, now and work; for there shall no straw be given you. Yet shall ye deliver the number of bricks.” The deputation retired discomfited. “They saw they were in evil case.” They encounter Moses and Aaron with upbraidings. They accuse them of having made them odious in the eyes of the Egyptians, and declare they have put a sword in Pharaoh’s hand against them. It was a perfectly natural phase for circumstances to assume. It is what would happen today were any despot so demanded to concede privileges to a serf race, and it is one of a thousand evidences of the truthfulness of the narrative that such should be recorded as the first result of the summons addressed to Pharaoh. It was a perfectly natural result, but it was not in harmony with the expectations of the people, who naturally supposed that the deliverance that Moses had given them assurance of, would be effected straight away. Instead of deliverance, they felt the bonds drawing tighter. It was only a preparation for the interposing hand of relief. Moses appealed to God in anguish of spirit: “Wherefore hast Thou so evil entreated this people? Why is it that Thou hast sent me? for since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Thy name, he hath done evil to this people; neither hast Thou delivered Thy people at all.” The answer he received was very consolatory: “Now shalt thou see what I shall do to Pharaoh ... Say unto the children of Israel, I am YAHWEH, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments. And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God. And ye shall know that I am YAHWEH, your Elohim, who bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” ([Ex. 6:1–8](#)).

Moses himself was re-assured and comforted by this message, and he went and communicated it to the disconsolate Israelites; but they were in no mood to listen. “They hearkened not unto Moses for anguish of spirit and for cruel bondage” ([Ex. 6:9](#)). Again how life-like this narrative. There is no artificial glow such as would have characterised a patriotic fictitious narration—no heroic confidence of the people; no sublime resignation in the prospect

of Divine interference; no magnificent attitudinising—not even on the part of Moses; for Moses himself, rebuffed by the heartless reception of this message by the people, returns to the Lord and says, “Behold the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me?” (verse [12](#)).

And shall we say that it was unbefitting divine wisdom that Israel’s afflictions should be aggravated, as the first result of divine interposition on their behalf? On the contrary, it accentuated the situation; it gave acuteness to the crisis; it deepened and sharpened Israel’s interest in the issue at stake; it chased away all indifference, and thoroughly roused the solicitude both of Israel and the Egyptians in the controversy about to be debated with stupendous power. It was a fitting preparation for the display of Omnipotence in exhibition of Yahweh’s mighty name.

Moses again addressed himself to Pharaoh, who demanded some proof of his authority to make the demand for Israel’s leave of absence. Moses then performed the appointed “sign”; Aaron threw his rod on the ground, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh had called his “wise men and sorcerers and magicians,” and “they also did in like manner with their enchantments, for they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents.” How are we to account for this achievement by sorcery of apparently the same marvel as God did by Moses? The answer is, it was an imitation. It was after hearing what Moses had done that the magicians did the same! But how could they do it? The record gives the answer: “it was with (or by) their enchantments.” It was by the exercise of their art. But could they by any exercise of their art perform a miracle? No; and they did not perform a miracle. Magicians never did perform miracles in the sense of a truly superhuman operation. Their wonders have always been “lying wonders,” that is, wonders apparently superhuman, but really only feats of hand or skilful applications of the secret forces of nature. Many such secrets were known to the Egyptians, some of which have perished with them. Artists of our day do not know how they obtained their fixity of colour, nor do mechanics understand by what application of power they lifted and put in their places the immense blocks that go to form the pyramids. Some electricians have concluded, from various circumstances, that they were acquainted with magnetism, vital and mechanical. Their “enchantments” were certainly due to natural knowledge, deftly applied. How could they turn a rod into a serpent? Not having been told (except that it was “with their enchantments”) how they did it, we cannot know exactly; but we may guess. They knew that this was what they had to do—apparently to turn rods into serpents by throwing them down. They therefore procured serpents, and paralysed them into a rigid form by some mode of chemical treatment. They then encrusted them with some substance that made them look exactly like sticks; and knowing how to terminate the paralysis of the beasts at will, by the application of some counter chemic or mode of generating electric force, they went before Pharaoh ready to show him the feat which had been ordered. They pitched their stiffened serpents on the floor, and of course the creatures started wriggling by the side of the serpent of Moses. The difference between the two performances became, however, at once apparent, for the true rod-serpent rears itself, darts quickly from one to another of the make-believe rod-serpents, swallows them and then quietly resumes its rod-state in the hands of Moses. There are feats that cannot be simulated, and this was one. It is one of the great differences between the miracles of Divine performance and those of priestly deception, that the works of Divine power are beyond the possibility of human appliance. Who could single out the first-born in every house and kill him? Who could open a path in the sea? Who could feed a multitude for forty years in a desert? Who could cleave the earth beneath a rebellious company and send them shrieking into the abyss? Who could, by the exercise of will, make the massive walls of a fortified city fall simultaneously in all directions? Who could destroy a whole army in

a single night, as the soldiers lay in their tents? Who could heal all diseases with a word? Who could raise the dead? These, and a hundred such like things are the wonders performed among Israel by Divine power—wonders of a nature that excludes the possibility of human collusion. Men may momentarily stiffen serpents, but they cannot give the unstiffened animals the power of devouring a dozen neighbours. They cannot shake Sinai by earthquake, and envelope it with fire and cloud, and cause a trumpet voice to be heard for days throughout a great distance.

However, Pharaoh was satisfied that the performance of Moses was only a higher form of the faculty exhibited by his own conjurers, and therefore he confirmed himself in his original determination to disregard his request. In this decision he was divinely helped. “The Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart that he hearkened not unto Moses and Aaron.” It was necessary he should resist, and therefore that he should be strengthened to do so. It is strange that any person should find difficulty in the reception of this fact, yet not strange when people entertain the idea that Pharaoh was an immortal being, and doomed by this treatment to the certainty of a hell such as is pictured in popular theology. When it is recognised that Pharaoh was an obstinate pagan, raised up expressly that in him God’s power might be exhibited in all the earth, it is impossible that the difficulty can exist to a logical mind. Human nature is but the earth-clay in the hand of the potter. The potter will work out of the chaotic clay-fields beautiful pottery fit for the potter’s house: but in the process, some clay is turned to inferior account, shaped into inferior vessels, and put to inferior though necessary purposes; tempered, perhaps, to a rough and strong state, quite unlike the fineness and beauty of porcelain. Where is the difficulty? None but such as the false doctrine of human immortality creates.

Pharaoh does not appear to have informed Moses of his decision. Moses and Aaron were dismissed with their serpent-stuffed, but no larger rod, but were left in ignorance of the fact that their marvellous performance had produced no effect, and that Pharaoh was resolved to refuse their request. The fact was communicated to Moses by God. “The Lord said unto Moses, Pharaoh’s heart is hardened: he refuseth to let the people go.” What next? Moses was told to put himself in Pharaoh’s way in the morning as he came to the river (probably for a morning bath): and to take with him “the rod, which was turned to a serpent”; and to say to Pharaoh when he met him, “Yahweh Elohim of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness: and behold hitherto thou wouldest not hear. Thus saith Yahweh, in this thou shalt know that I am Yahweh. Behold, I will smite with the rod that is in mine hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood, and the fish that is in the river shall die, and the river shall stink: and the Egyptians shall loathe to drink of the water in the river.” To deliver such a message to a man just out in the fresh morning, and with the luxury of a morning bath in the river before him, was certainly to arrest his attention in the most striking manner possible, and to propose to him a sign most palpable and beyond the power of man. We are not told how Pharaoh received this un-courtly interruption of his morning privacy. He was probably displeased enough, and impatiently ordered Moses out of his presence. But God’s business is very urgent when it comes. It cannot stand aside to suit human convenience. God told Moses to order Aaron to stretch out the rod over all the waters of Egypt to turn them to blood. Why the stretching out of the rod? Because there was a right moment for the wonder to commence, and it was fitting that that right moment should be marked so that the connection between the accomplishment of the marvel and the holder of the rod might be apparent. Was it Aaron or was it the rod that produced the effect? Neither: “Yahweh smote the river” ([Ex. 7:25](#)); but Aaron and the rod (commanded by Moses) were God’s signal. A railway official shows a white flag from a gallery in the Birmingham railway station, and the train moves

off. It is not the flag that does it; it is the signal for the thing to be done: the steam liberated by the driver does the work. God's drivers are the angels; the Spirit is the steam. When the signal was shown—when Aaron's rod was elevated—the waters throughout Egypt were simultaneously operated on by the angelic workers, so as to be chemically and organically transmuted into a nauseous coagulation, offensive and deleterious to man and beast. Ye polite unbelievers! reconsider and discard your shallow objections. Water turns into blood in your bodies every day. Can ye tell how the marvel is accomplished? Ye may talk of gastric juices, and chyle, pancreatic fluids, absorbent vessels, secreting glands, and all the other apparatus of the animal economy, but when ye have gone over the whole list, ye are still where ye were—ignorant as the cattle in the field of the essential process by which the ingredients of the wonderful element we call water are turned into the still more wonderful crimson fluid that charges the fibre of the body with energy and life. We only know the fact, but not its occult nature; and because the fact is slowly performed every day, ye think it not wonderful. Or else, if ye have sufficient sense to feel that perhaps it is wonderful, ye instantly stultify your reason, and make all wise men ashamed by your assertions that this is the only form in which the wonderful act can be performed—that God can turn water into blood in your bodies, but he cannot do it in the open air on the banks of the Nile. Poor masses of cellular tissue and water! Men will learn yet that your notions and impressions, and poor capacities, are no measure of the possibilities of the Power that produced the framework of heaven and earth.

God can do things quickly or slowly—by direct volition or circuitous organic incorporation of the invisible forces—according as the occasion calls. The display of His power to Israel and the Egyptians required the spoiling of the Egyptian water everywhere, and it was spoiled. But “the Egyptians did so with their enchantments.” Yes. They got a small quantity of water; it must have been a small quantity, because it was after the water in general was turned into blood; and with their pettifogging appliances, they were able to turn clear water into crimson liquor; any chemist can do it today. And because they were able to do this, Pharaoh came to the same conclusion as in the case of the serpents: that Moses was merely a cleverer magician than the court sorcerers. So “neither did he set his heart to this also” ([Ex. 7:23](#)). But there was the outstanding fact nevertheless, before his eyes—that “all the waters in the river were turned into blood, and the fish that was in the river died, and the river stank, and the Egyptians could not drink of the water of the river ... and all the Egyptians digged round about the river for water to drink.”

Seven days of this wretched state of things probably sufficed only to make Pharaoh morose. It did not lead him to make favourable advances to Moses. He remained in sullen retirement, vexed, angry, and impotent. It was necessary to approach him again. “The Lord spake unto Moses. Go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, Thus said the Lord, let my people go that they may serve me. And if thou refuse to let them go, behold I will smite all thy borders with frogs. And the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into thine house, and into thy bedchamber, and upon thy bed, and into the houses of thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thine ovens, and into thy kneading troughs. And the frogs shall come up both on thee and upon thy people, and upon all thy servants.” How Pharaoh received this dreadful renewal of the subject, we are not informed. That he resented it, we may gather from the fact that Yahweh commanded Moses to proceed with the infliction of the threatened plague. “And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt.” Frogs were instantaneously produced in multitudes, and became such a distressing plague as we can only imagine. It was a miracle, but the miracle lay only in the rapid production. Slow

production takes place every day. God, who started the slow process at the beginning, can accelerate it when occasion requires; and the occasion required it, for God was proving His existence and power to Israel and all the earth, in the blows struck in the controversy raised about the liberation of Israel. And so the frogs came and afflicted the Egyptians greatly, “and the magicians did so *with their enchantments*.” Nothing easier under the circumstances. There were frogs enough all about. They had but to collect and secrete, and suddenly liberate a sufficient number to convince Pharaoh that they also possessed the terrible power working with this man Moses. Still the power of the magicians to add to the plague was not very reassuring to Pharaoh, in the absence of power on their part to rid the land of the plague. Moses and Aaron evidently had the greater power, and so he appealed to Moses and Aaron, and through them to the God in whose name they performed their wonders. “Entreat Yahweh that he may take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go that they may do sacrifice unto the Lord.” Moses turned Pharaoh’s relenting mood to the best account. “When shall I entreat for thee?” This fixing of a time for the stoppage of the plague would show how completely under Yahweh’s control the forces at work were. Pharaoh fixes the time, “Tomorrow.” Moses agrees, adding this remark, which shows the nature of the effect aimed at, “THAT THOU MAYEST KNOW THAT THERE IS NONE LIKE UNTO THE LORD OUR GOD.”