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Negotiation Lessons from the Book (not the Film) of Exodus

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Introduction

The recent film “Exodus: Gods and Kings” has sparked some renewed interest in the actual written record of those events. It did so for me. I was astounded as a lawyer and mediator to read slowly the detailed accounts of the negotiations in the book of Exodus chapters 1-14. Had I missed these dynamics which have been so much a part of my professional and academic life? So I share some of the themes which have emerged belately for me in this case study extraordinaire. One of the indicators from research of an “expert” modern day negotiator is someone who takes time to reflect systematically on past negotiations and attempt to record lessons from those events—always a challenge for lawyers under the pressure of billable hours.

The case study account is found in Exodus chapters 1-14 and quotes below are taken from the modern translation by Eugene Peterson, “The Message”.

I will assume that the reader knows the basic story of the negotiations between Yahweh (aka the Israelite god) via his two messengers Moses and Aaron, and the Egyptian Pharaoh and his advisers, though perhaps you may have missed some of various sophisticated nuances and dynamics as I did. (An abbreviated version of the story has been added at the end of this comment.)

Lessons from Yahweh and his negotiating team

If negotiation “power” in its various forms could be measured, then Yahweh had overwhelming dominance. The nine escalating strikes and the annihilation of the Egyptian army provided repeated and cumulative evidence that Yahweh had multiple alternatives to a negotiated agreement (strong “WATNA” and “BATNA” in negotiation acronyms). Yet he chose via Moses and Aaron to use elements of “successful” negotiation behaviour before resorting to the alternatives. For example, he:
• Sent Moses as a persistent representative, one who was well known to Pharaoh, and who understood Egyptian language and royal culture intimately.

• Sent a trusted representative who was a self confessed “bumbling Columbo” and stutterer; (Ex 4:10-17) but who was accompanied by his brother Aaron, who was supposedly more articulate.

• Sent Aaron as a witness to the out-of-office-by-the-river-no-wires negotiations, so that there would be a confirming version of the dangerous encounters with the slippery Pharaoh (Advice from my first legal mentor “Never talk alone to anyone on this list of lawyers. Show this list to no-one”.). Additionally, ensures that some of Pharaoh’s advisers are present so that Pharaoh could not present a sanitized version of the conversations to his constituents.

• Sent a representative who had direct access to the boss, namely the Egyptian Pharaoh, and skillfully approached him early each morning on his river stroll (Ex 8:20), thereby avoiding misunderstandings, formalities and reinterpretations by intermediary bureaucrats.

• Began the negotiations with a moderate demand for three days free from labour for a festival of worship (Ex 5:3), with only a gentle mutual threat or consequence attached – “lest [our God] strike us with either death or disease”. Highly competent negotiators usually begin with “mutual consequence” language before switching to “unilateral threat” language.

• Debriefed with his negotiation team before and after every round of meetings to provide encouragement, strategy and repeated “on the same page” clarity, especially when the team was demoralized. (Ex 6: 1-13).

• Kept the lines of communication open for ten increasingly dangerous meetings, despite deceptive behaviour by Pharaoh, and presumably despite criticism from Moses’ wavering and multitudinous constituents in the background. Finally, a huffy walkout accompanied by threats did occur. After the ninth strike of darkness, “Pharaoh [finally] said to Moses: ‘Get out of my sight! And watch your step. I don’t want to ever see you again. If I lay eyes on you again, you’re dead’. Moses said, ‘Have it your way, you won’t see my face again’ (Ex 10: 28-29).
Despite the mutual threats, Moses and Aaron returned for two more rounds of tense negotiations!

- Carefully warned Pharaoh and advisers in advance about each impending and escalating consequence if there was “no deal”. There were no ambushes till the last surprising episode, during which the pursuing Egyptian army was drowned.

- Designed each consequence so that there could be no doubt that Yahweh was the top god. There was zero statistical chance that these nine calamitous events were “accidents” of “nature”. Additionally, the Israelite slave suburb of Goshen was a more-than-serendipitous sanctuary from the plague of flies, animal deaths, hail, darkness and death of first-borns.

- Yahweh split the Egyptian negotiating team, just as Pharaoh had almost successfully split the shaky Israelite team. Pharaoh’s advisers, and the suffering Egyptian citizens, predictably discovered that their interests and risks diverged, at least in priority, from those of their deluded CEO. (Ex 12:33, 10:7, 9:21-22). The role of every competent negotiator is to split the opposition, and unite his own team.

- Emphasised that when the negotiations were “over”, they were not “over” (Wade 2006). The fractious nation of ex-slaves quickly redefined “success” and had serious post-settlement regrets. The history and “facts” behind the deal were reconstructed or forgotten by the vast majority of Israelites. Predictably, Pharaoh as the “losing” negotiator also repeated his past behaviour by reneging on the sealed deal. Therefore, like all perceptive team leaders, Yahweh and Moses add some unifying glue to their wavering constituents by more signs and wonders (Ex 13-14); temporary relief from the anguish of war (Ex 13:17); multiple requirements for immediate action--- as compared to “mere” verbal declarations of settlement solidarity (Ex 12); extensive rules and rituals to assist group and individual memory (Ex 12: 24-27; 13); ongoing charismatic leadership from Moses; and burning of all possible bridges of return to pre-release Egyptian life.
Lessons from the Mistakes of Pharaoh and his negotiating team

In contrast to the role model of Yahweh and his negotiating team, there are many sobering lessons from the failure of Pharaoh as a diplomat and negotiator. Here are a few of those failures.

Preparation x 3

Research and anecdote suggest that every competent negotiator engages in systematic preparation (Wade 2001a). Pharaoh and initially his advisers appear to do minimal systematic preparation. Instead they react with over-confidence and habit to the ludicrous demands of the messengers Moses and Aaron to “let my people go”.

Let me hypothesise what standard systematic preparation, perhaps scribbled onto papyrus by Pharaoh and his advisers would and should look like.

Preliminary Factual Discovery and Hypothesis—who is sending these upstart messengers?

To what extent should we take these messengers seriously? To what extent should we commit time and resources to these negotiations?

The answers to these initial questions depend on who is the messengers’ boss, and how “powerful” is he? We need more facts and evidence that the Israelite Yahweh is high in the divine hierarchy, AND that these two apparently insignificant messengers have his authority to negotiate and settle. Some advisers who come from an ancient or modern deophobic culture may not be comfortable with this initial process of factual discovery.

Until some convincing proof emerges, we will politely ignore and stonewall these two overreaching messengers. Initially, there is no need to kill or exile these two irritants, at least because Moses is a well respected member of the Egyptian aristocracy, and also because creating two Israelite martyrs may be premature and ultimately unnecessary. Meanwhile, we will discredit the two leaders by multiplying the workload on their constituents as punishment for their absurd demands.
However, by the fourth round of negotiations (post snake, blood, frog and gnat strikes), this initial question had a basic answer. Moses’ god had more signs and wonders than the gods at the beck and call of the Egyptian magicians. At that point, a second round of serious negotiation preparation was essential---but apparently went missing perhaps due to Pharaohic testosterone and habit. Only three things matter in negotiation---preparation, preparation and preparation.

What follows is a simple goal and risk analysis which could and should have been done by Pharaoh and his advisers. In some bullying dictatorships and corporations, advisers are not brave and skilled enough to prepare such a goal and risk analysis. By the fourth round of negotiations, Pharaoh’s advisers had become both brave and blunt—but to no avail as we shall see.

**Goal and Risk Analysis—Pharaoh, Yahweh and his two messengers.**

Assuming that Moses and Aaron can prove on the balance of probabilities (or even more certainly) that their boss is the/a top god in the hierarchy of gods; and that they are his authorized messengers, what are the goals and risks in these negotiations for Pharaoh and associates? (NB every goal normally involves a converse risk).

**Answer:** We can identify the normal goals of any dictator, whether Mugabe, Stalin, Hitler, Putin, Pharaoh, or your local downsizing CEO, are --- in no particular order, though individual leaders can usually be encouraged to rank their initial and emerging priorities:

1. **Isolate or kill dissenting leaders; and split the fragile opposition team.**
   One of the standard goals of dictators is to destroy the leadership of any dissenting group. Pharaoh chose not to kill or imprison the upstarts Moses and Aaron, though he ridiculed them initially. “Why on earth, Moses and Aaron, would you suggest the people be given a holiday? Back to work?” (Ex 5:4) Instead, he used the common strategy of employers seeking to break a strike. He immediately and savagely punished the million plus constituent slaves and families for the foolish demands of their deluded leaders. The Israelites were immediately coerced to produce the same daily quota of bricks, however with zero supplies of straw. Predictably, the Israelite
foremen bitterly turned upon Moses and Aaron. In turn, Moses complained to his revolutionary boss, “From the moment I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, things have only gotten worse for this people. And rescue? Does this look like rescue to you?” (Ex 5:23). The team split. Presumably, there may have been rumblings in the Israelite team. “Let’s be satisfied with what we have. Remember what pharaoh’s father did—he killed all of our newborn male children.”

2. **Maximise cheap labour.** Retain the 600,000 male Israelite slaves (and at least double that number with women and child slaves added), as cheap labour for as long as possible. Particularly keep the younger slaves who will provide the longest returns of low-cost labour, and for breeding of new slaves. Retaining cheap servants is especially important if the dictator and his cronies are personally profiting from such, and replacements are difficult to find. Once an oversimplified “yes-no” goal (“lose” or “keep” the slaves) is articulated, in any preparation there are normally multiple latent “sub-lines” of negotiation which, if possible, should emerge early. For example, “lose” or keep:

- Which “types” of slaves? (old or young? Male or female? Skilled artisans or not? etc)
- How many of each type?
- Immediately or in instalments over time?
- For how long? Temporary or long term departure?
- To where? Nearby or far away?
- With what official publicity statements? Departure due to generosity, fear, need for a religious holiday etc?
- Taking what assets with them?
- In return for what compensation paid by the slaves to whom? (or even vice versa, paid by organization to the departing slaves?)

A similar agenda is common during negotiations to dissolve modern professional partnerships by replacing the word “slaves” with “clients”, “partners” and “employees”.
An abacus bead can then normally be moved painfully back and forth along each line, in order to find some conditional and mutually satisfactory outcome. Thus the abacus remains useful in both modern and ancient times. Pharaoh skillfully began to use these sub-lines as the negotiations intensified---though only a few popular retellings seem to pick up these fascinating parts of the narrative.

3. **Avoid ubiquitous “opening the floodgate” and precedent creation.**
   Pharaoh’s second predictable goal (and converse risk) is familiar to all bureaucratic negotiators—including banks, lawyers, airlines, insurers, parents, politicians and dictators. Once a concession is granted to one needy group, then others will ask or demand similar “consistent” or “fair” concessions. Standard ancient and modern negotiation moves to limit any flood or precedent are twofold—confidentiality clauses, or proven “uniqueness” of the applicants. It is a challenge to secretly release over one million slaves. However, the latter move--namely the “uniqueness” of the god of the Israelites, was both available, and proven to Pharaoh. However, he was apparently captive to both habit and its cousin predestination, and accordingly blew this available and face-saving “uniqueness” move.
   Pharaoh reverted to the standard “no early Arab spring”, much to the consternation of his objecting advisers. “Pharaoh’s servants said to him—‘Let these people go and worship their God. Can’t you see that Egypt is on its last legs?’” (Ex 10:7).

4. **Sustain and enhance strongman status.**
   It is vital for the Egyptian nobles, magicians, civil servants and others to perceive that Pharaoh is a tough leader---one who protects them from the predatory demands of other governments, let alone the freedom calls of a million plus valuable slaves. Even if the negotiations are long and bloody, Pharaoh and his advisers should persist with “no” and if
necessary violent tactics. This will enhance his status locally and internationally—“don’t mess with me”.

5. Personal ego and negotiation style.

Perhaps Pharaoh also had the standard dictator's or CEO's goal of acting consistently with his own self perception as a very important god-man or god-woman. The narrative repeatedly labels him with the English word “stubborn”. Like many bosses and dictators, having made a decision, he lacked the skills and personality (“power”?) to admit, “I have made a mistake”, even though his advisers belatedly began screaming “mistake, mistake, fix this fast”.

Who is responsible for Pharaoh’s character defects? The narrative repeats the mystical tension between predestination, environment, genes, culture and freewill!! “God hardened Pharaoh in his stubbornness” (Ex 9:12); “Pharaoh’s heart turned rock-hard” (Ex 9:35).

Modern day social psychologists might expand on the translated word “stubbornness” with multiple concepts such as personality disorder, cultural stereotype, attributional distortion (eg Ex 10:10 “Look, you’re up to no good---it’s written all over your faces”), hawks and moderates, entrapment, escalation, heavy tactics, reduction of communication, loss of empathy, dehumanization, removal of inhibition, zero-sum thinking—to name a few (Pruitt and Kim, 2004).

Of course, Pharaoh’s character defect went far beyond the English meaning of “stubbornness”. His “ingrained” method of negotiation (apparently entrenched by nature and nurture), was: repetitively stonewall until he was subjected to a crisis of pain; only then orally promise concessions and good behaviour to gain reprieve (Ex 10:17—Pharaoh said “I've sinned against your God and against you. Overlook my sin one more time”); then immediately renge on the oral promises;
and wait for the next cycle of attrition via stonewall, pain, promise and renege.

We all know negotiators in business and family with this MO. They tend to be encouraged by repeated short term success. The leadership of modern day North Korea provides one illustration, as well as a number of aspiring or in-office leaders in western democracies. However, once this style of negotiation becomes well known and “named”, by experienced negotiators such as Yahweh and Moses—(eg Ex 8: 29 “Moses said---but don’t play games with us and change your mind about releasing us—”), it loses some of its power to confuse, disappoint and exhaust. One repetitively observed skill of highly competent negotiators is the humble or aggressive “naming” of what is happening.

Moreover, this stonewall; pain; promise; renege method of operation is occasionally very dangerous, as eventually it leaves the practitioner totally untrusted, isolated and friendless in a corner with “nothing to lose”, thereby justifying bouts of violent and scorched-earth behaviour both for and against the relabeled “predictably deceptive liar”.


Another goal of Pharaoh and all other leaders to some extent, was and is to enhance the economic well-being of their country or organisation. And reversing that goal to risk language---if Moses’s boss is indeed the top god, he can do some serious damage to the economy, to the Egyptian army, and to our international reputation, if we stonewall him and his messengers.

As is well known, damage to the Egyptian economy did multiply. Sometimes escalated conflict, painful consequences are necessary before certain life goals and risks are recognized and highlighted. Enlightening pain and regret can occasionally be one of the bizarre potential “benefits” of litigation or war. (Wade 2001b; Kahneman 2011).

Examples of the damage to individuals and the nation of Egypt included:
Ex 7:24 “[A]ll the Egyptians had to dig inland from the river for water because they couldn’t drink from the [bloody] Nile water”.
Ex 9:25 “The hail hit hard all over Egypt. Everything exposed out in the fields, people and animals and crops, was smashed.
Ex 10:15 “The locusts ate everything, every blade of grass, every piece of fruit, anything that the hail didn’t get.
Ex 12:30 “There wasn’t a house [in the land of Egypt] in which someone wasn’t dead.”

7. Physical health of beloved family members.
Another predictable goal of Pharaoh and other negotiators, was to preserve the health of family members, especially a beloved first son who is the heir to the throne, and one who will hopefully provide protection and comfort in his parent’s old age. The writer has been involved in numerous mediations where this risk of damage to family health has been ignored in a “commercial” conflict, until the onset of illness triggers settlement. For Pharaoh, it was the deaths of all the firstborn of Egypt that led to his grieving speech to Moses, “Get out of here and be done with you—you and your Israelites” (Ex 12:31).

Conclusion—missing goal and risk analysis.
Like Pharaoh, modern day negotiators frequently fail to prepare, prepare and prepare, by failing to set out initial and evolving goals and their matching risks, such as the list above. They focus too often on a micro economic goal with either “yes” or “no”, or somewhere in between, to the immediately visible dispute. “Let my people go”---or not; or in modern day disputes “This is just about the money”. They lose the trees for the forest. Likewise did Pharaoh.

Without a careful goal and risk analysis on a dated papyrus flipchart, Pharaoh was doomed to pursue habit, delusion, intuition, emotion, decision traps and error: or alternatively, to restate the ubiquitous freewill-predestination tension present in every field of learning---“God hardened Pharaoh in his stubbornness. He wouldn’t listen—“ (Ex 9:12).
Pharaoh, his advisers and army eventually “lost” every life and commercial goal in this extended and famous negotiation with Yahweh and his two messengers. Every risk came to fruition.

Nevertheless, Pharaoh’s path contained a number of other instructive negotiation moves and mistakes which are often overlooked in popular retelling. For example:

1. **Pharaoh, the interest based negotiator--almost.**

   Pharaoh eventually made repeated attempts to “find the interests/goals/ and needs behind the suggested solution of unlimited and immediate Israelite freedom”; and to “explore offers and options which satisfied each negotiator’s needs”! His skills anticipated Fisher and Ury’s classic book. Yahweh’s stated first goal was “release my people” [why?—a key negotiator’s enquiry]---“so they can worship me”. (Ex 8:1,2; Ex 9:1,2).

   Eventually, Pharaoh says “no” to the demand and “yes” to the reason. After the plague of flies, Pharaoh called in Moses and Aaron and said, “Go ahead. Sacrifice to your God—but do so in this country.”(Ex 8:25). Nice move Pharaoh. Perhaps the ubiquitous phrases “what if” or “assuming that” might have provided more oil to the offer? “Your If is the only peacemaker; much virtue in If” (Shakespeare, 1599). However, Moses initially refused this offer to “sacrifice within the geographical boundaries of Egypt”. His refusal was based on the interesting argument of cross cultural outrage—“If we openly sacrifice what is so deeply offensive to Egyptians, they’ll kill us”. Amazingly, Moses and Pharaoh then reach a “limited freedom” deal. Moses said “Let us go three days’ journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to our God—[and] “Pharaoh responded “All right. I’ll release you to go and sacrifice to your God in the wilderness. Only don’t go too far [in those 3 days]” (Ex 8:26-27). This was interest based bargaining at its best, yet is rarely mentioned in the abbreviated versions of these events. However, Pharaoh blew the deal away with his standard post-pain onset of “stubbornness” (Ex 8:32). How many negotiators live with long term regrets about the early offer or deal which they rejected?

2. **Belated Discovery of Goal Number Two! Success?**

   **Almost.**
Pharaoh also failed negotiation 101 as he initially did not pause and ask, “What else is your boss trying to achieve apart from Israelite freedom to worship him?” Fatal mistake.

Yahweh’s second goal behind the freedom demand, was to be recognized as the top god in the universe and to be so recognized by the Egyptians!—gasp.

“—I am going to strike you and your servants ---so you will get it into your head that there’s no-one like me anywhere in all the Earth.” (Ex 9:13-14).

“—for one reason only I’ve kept you on your feet. To make you recognize my power so that my reputation spreads in all the Earth.” (Ex 9:14)

Pharaoh and his servants eventually did understand this second devastating goal of their counterpart negotiator. However their belated offer to recognize Yahweh’s top cosmic status was tainted by Pharaoh’s ingrained habit of vacillation and recanting, whenever the pressure abated.

Pharaoh said: “[Your] God is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to God. We’ve had enough of God’s thunder and hail. I’ll let you go.” (Ex 9: 27-18). But his post-crisis grovelling speeches were no longer believed. Moses responded (Ex 9:29-30): “ The thunder will stop and the hail end and so you’ll know that the land is God’s land. Still, I know that you and your servants have no respect for God”.

By the time of the seventh strike, namely the wild hailstorm, the negotiations had effectively split Pharaoh’s team on the topic of “respect”. “All of Pharaoh’s servants who had respect for God’s word got their workers and animals under cover as fast as they could, but those who didn’t take God’s word seriously left their workers and animals out in the fields.” (Ex 9: 20,21).

3. Predictable Deceptive MO

Pharaoh demonstrated his standard method of operation; and he cemented his untrustworthiness publicly NINE times by his MO of stonewall; pain; promise and renege. These were and are serious negotiation errors as repetition established predictable reneging patterns; and destroyed any sympathy that Pharaoh might have as a leader in “difficult” times; and gradually promoted the option of annihilation by the offended top god.
Some modern day litigators and the Netflix “House of Cards” genre of politicians, repeat a similar deceptive MO for a time, until reputation and gossip ensures commercial or electoral “annihilation”.

4. Multiple negotiation lines.

As mentioned earlier, Pharaoh belatedly understood his own goals, and realized that the negotiation lines were many---not just “yes” or “no” to the request “let [all] my people go [now]”. So Pharaoh began to make multiple clever offers by drawing the abacus bead along new negotiation lines such as:

- **How many** slaves will be released?
  Pharaoh moved from zero slaves, up to “just the [600,000] men” (Ex 10:10-11). In anecdotes and research on negotiation strategy, this was arguably too large a jump as a first move, unless balanced by smaller moves on other lines as part of the “package”. Later as the pressure intensified, he added, “take your children” (Ex 10:24). Seeking to retain the female slaves as the last negotiation counter presumably had some special value in Egyptian society?

- **For how long** will the slaves be released?
  Pharaoh moved from “never” to about a week of travel and worship in the wilderness, but not “too far” away (Ex 8:28).

- **What herds of animals** can the slaves take with them? (Ex 10:10-11) Pharaoh had lost many animals to the recent hail storms, so perhaps that prompted him to offer “zero” animals once; and then later to repeat that “zero” offer (Ex 10:24).

- **How much money** should the Israelites be paid to leave? Predictably, Pharaoh does not even place this insulting agenda item on the negotiating table. Research suggests that the majority of modern day litigators are seriously deluded in our predictions about the actual outcomes of conflict (eg Kiser 2008; Wade 2003). Likewise Pharaoh.
However, his team split and the Israelites received large incentive payments from the long-suffering Egyptian citizens to leave quickly. “---The Israelites asked the Egyptians for silver, gold and clothing—they picked those Egyptians clean” (Ex 12:36).

**Conclusion**

Research suggests that outstanding negotiators have the habit of reflecting and recording some “lessons” from case studies. The negotiation process between Yahweh, Moses and Aaron, and Pharaoh and his advisers as recorded in the book of Exodus, provides an extraordinary case study from which some lessons for modern life can be extracted; and whereby modern day negotiation “competency” research is predictably underlined by this anecdote.

JHW, Vancouver, March, 2015

**References and Further Reading**


Shakespeare, W. *As You Like It*, Act 5, scene 4 (circa 1599)
Wade 2001a: J.H.Wade, “Systematic Risk Analysis for Negotiators and Litigators: But You Never Told me it would be like This” (2001) 13 *Bond Law Rev* 462


The last four articles can also be found under the author’s name at epublications@bond.edu.au

**Abbreviated version of Exodus 1-14**

Around 1550? BC, the then pharaoh of Egypt (possibly Ahmose I, or Thutmose II—there are various historic candidates), was in control of a dangerously multiplying number of Israelite slaves. There were about 600,000 male slaves and more than double that number if Israelite women and children were added.

They lived in a slave ghetto called Goshen in the eastern Nile delta, and experienced various hardships as an enslaved population.

Moses was an Israelite survivor of a purge and culling by a previous pharaoh who had ordered the murder of all newborn Israelite male babies. He had been raised for 40 years in the Egyptian court, and fled to the desert of Midian for another four decades after he killed an Egyptian slave supervisor.

In this wilderness, Moses had an encounter with the Israelite god, Yahweh. He was instructed to return to Egypt and demand that the new pharaoh free the Israelite slaves. Predictably fearful of such a task, Moses had resisted until Yahweh agreed to send his brother Aaron with him as an articulate mouthpiece. Moses evidently also suffered from a stutter in his speech.

Moses and Aaron approached the pharaoh and his advisers multiple times, and made various daunting demands for freedom. Initially, pharaoh responded, not by shooting the two messengers, but by punishing the multitude of slave workers. He cut their supplies of straw and still insisted that they meet their daily quota for the manufacture of bricks. Predictably, many slaves complained, but Moses and Aaron eventually persisted. To add authority to their apparently ridiculous opening offer of “let my people have a three day break to worship Yahweh”, they performed a series of escalating signs and wonders. These
included turning Moses’ staff into a snake, polluting the Nile with blood, releasing plagues of frogs, gnats, flies; disease upon animals, infestation of boils, hailstorms, locusts, and darkness. Pharaoh’s magicians replicated the first three of these “wonders”, but ran out of magic thereafter. Yahweh briefed and debriefed with Moses and Aaron before and after each of the negotiation and strike episodes. Each of the sequentially promised “strikes” wreaked havoc in Egyptian society. By way of sharp contrast, the slave suburb of Goshen was protected from the series of strikes.

With each round of disaster, pharaoh vacillated, stonewalled, made deals and reneged. However, the final tragic strike changed his mind—temporarily at least. The firstborn of Egypt all died overnight, including pharaoh’s son. However, Moses had instructed the Israelites to mark their doorframes with the blood of sacrificed lambs. Those who did so were saved from this final horror.

The million plus Israelite slaves had hurriedly packed, and then fled in the aftershock, accompanied by herds of animals and much to the relief of the local Egyptian population. They were guided by pillars of cloud and fire until they reached and were blocked by a corner of the Red Sea. Meanwhile, grieving pharaoh had changed his mind yet again, and sent an army of chariots in vengeful pursuit. In a famous scene, Moses led the slave multitudes into the Red Sea via a path which parted for them. Later, the water closed in on the pursuing Egyptian army which was annihilated.

For another 40 years, the vast assembly of complaining Israelites wandered through the Sinai peninsular under the leadership of Moses. Eventually, they reached the “promised land”, though Moses died before they entered that territory.