

Moses demands that Pharaoh “let my people go.” Pharaoh refuses as plagues ravage his nation. When the most horrible plague is foretold, an esteemed member of Pharaoh’s court named Hannu begins a journey of courage and faith to save his nation.

The Plagues of Pharaoh

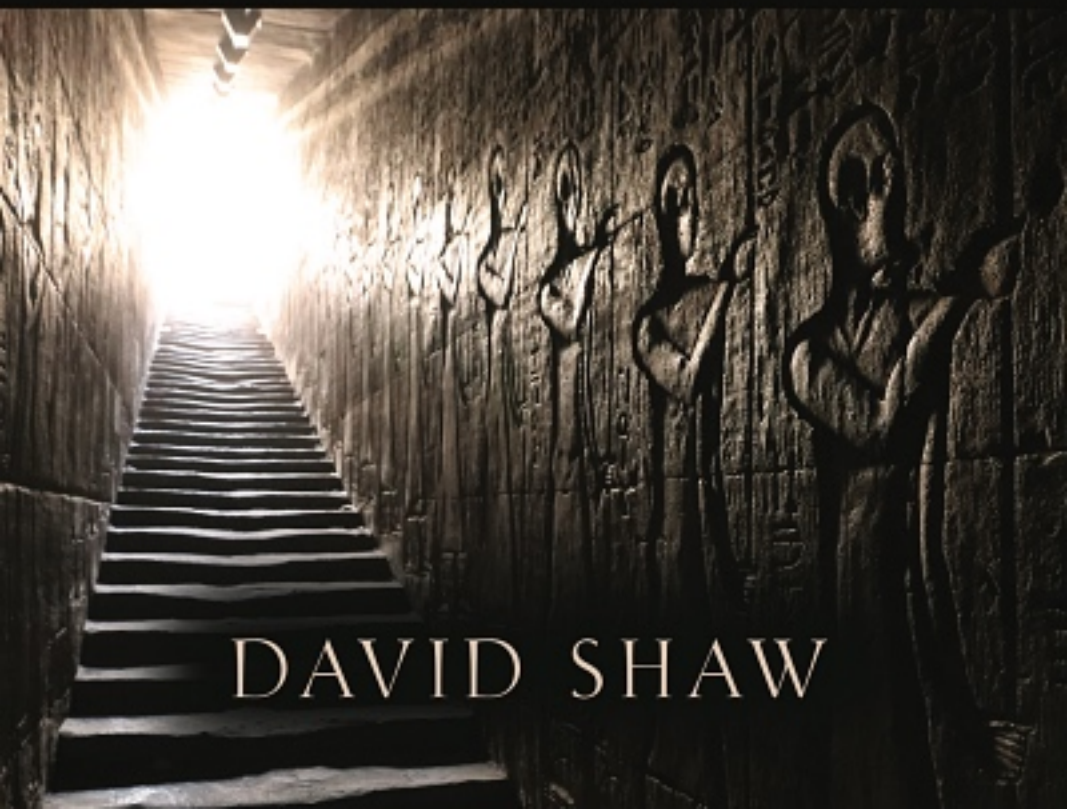
By David Shaw

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THE PLAGUES OF PHARAOH



DAVID SHAW

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Chapter One - Moses

Moses knew this was a mistake. He stood in the dark anteroom of the palace, shaking his head. His trembling fingers pushed the staff of God toward his brother, Aaron.

“You should do this.”

Aaron shook his head. “Remember,” he said, pushing the staff back, “first, get their attention.” He raised his own staff. “Rap three times. Only when they look at you do you speak. I will be right next to you.”

“It is a mistake, God made a mistake, I am not right for this.”

Aaron stood watching him. Moses took a deep breath, licked his lips but did not move. Aaron lay his staff against a wall and put his hands on each side of his brother’s face.

“It is no mistake. *You* shall lead us, no one else.” He nodded toward the door. “The time is now, go.”

Moses nodded and strode into the hall that was bright with sunlight and thick with talk. Ministers of Pharaoh

gesticulated and argued in soft or brittle tones. Aaron nodded, raised his staff. Moses spoke.

“You must let my people go!”

He squinted up at Pharaoh, took another breath, looked at the faces turning to him and slouched on the staff. Closing his eyes, he continued.

“To worship our God in d-d-distant lands for three days.”

Silence. Moses rapped his staff on the floor. His brother Aaron spoke quietly and Moses rapped again twice. Another word from Aaron and Moses straightened and spoke forcefully.

“You must let my people go to worship our God in distant lands for three days.”

Pharaoh rose, all except Moses and Aaron bowed. The throne was at the top of a ramp that ran the length of the hall to the height of two men. Sunlight poured through skylights on the god-king’s practiced walk, his chin augmented by a braided gold beard, his eyes painted wide and all seeing. A blue lotus amulet swung from a leather collar.

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“We have missed you like we miss a son.” He displayed no anger. “This palace, this kingdom is lacking without your heart. It has been so many years.”

“It has been five years and I am not your son. I am a Hebrew.” Moses closed his eyes and tightened his fists. “Y-y-y.” He gripped his staff, kept his eyes closed. “You must let my people go to worship our God for three days.”

“Who is this God that let’s your speech revert? You had taken such control when you lived here. Why would this God of Hebrews let this happen?”

“He is my God.”

“Then why,” Pharaoh said softly, “does he not tame your demon? When you left this palace your words were confident and correct. Now you struggle again.”

“I have been given this t-t-task; it does not matter how I say it.”

“Of course, it matters, you must command attention or your words become folly.”

Moses watched Pharaoh complete his descent.

“You must let my people go to worship our God in the distant lands for three days.”

“I raised you as my son, loved you as my son...”

“I am not your son! You must...”

“I must do as I wish and nothing more. I am Pharaoh, god-king, descendant of the gods, touched by immortality.” The assembled parted as he walked toward Moses, his guards ready to place a seat should Pharaoh decide to sit.

“You are a man like all other men and you are descended from men for there is no other God.”

“So say you when you are able to say anything. Your God, should there be such a God, shows weakness in his messenger. This does little to gain respect let alone fear.”

They stood looking at each other as the brother of Moses stepped forward. Moses noticed him as if out of a trance.

“You must do this,” Moses said, “you shall do this! Behold!”

Aaron threw his staff to the floor between Moses and Pharaoh. The second vizier to Pharaoh, a man named

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Hannu, stepped forward to shield the god-king as did the guards but Pharaoh raised his hands. At the feet of Hannu the staff shook then bent and he stepped back. Slowly the staff thickened and curled and shone moist at their feet. Small cracks in the staff became eyes and a mouth as it slid across the floor and a narrow tongue darted out as it circled. It stopped before a sem-priest in a leopard skin robe, rose and hissed.

The sem-priest, a proud, unafraid man named Hartumn, sneered, "Servants of Pharaoh, throw down your staffs!"

Staffs clattered to the floor between Pharaoh and Moses. Eyes wide, Hartumn chanted words familiar to none of the assembled. The staffs slowly moved and glistened and grew thicker and longer than that which Moses' God created. Eyes and mouths opened as they slid to surround the smaller serpent.

Moses spoke, "You must let my people go to worship our God in the distant lands for three days."

Moses' arrogance was pitiful, a poor spokesman indeed for this God of the Hebrews. His power, or his God's power, was simple magic. Hartumn laughed as did Hannu and the others. Pharaoh shook his head.

“I loved you as my son but you betray me and now you betray your people!” Pharaoh said. “Now your people will make my bricks with no straw. Let your God help them with that as he helps you with your words.”

Moses was bewildered. “This should not be hard for you. What do you fear?”

“I fear nothing, certainly not you.”

“Behold,” said Moses quietly as he pointed to the serpents created by the magic of Hartumn. They were each being eaten by the serpent of Aaron’s staff making no move to escape the smaller snake. “You shall fear me,” Moses said as the snake ate all the others. When the staff straightened Aaron lifted it and walked out. Moses followed.

“Be glad I leave you with your hands,” said Pharaoh, “your betrayal deserves no less than their loss.”

Hannu, the second vizier to Pharaoh, watched from his seat of honor. As a young man he had entered Pharaoh’s court a month before the infant Moses had been found by the god-king’s oldest daughter, Bithiah. Brought into the court by his father to be block assistant to the Viceroy, Hannu watched Moses grow up in luxury. While Hannu transcribed orders to the fields and overseers, Moses raced

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horses and learned the ways of swords. He walked the palace in pleated robes and curled sandals while Hannu wore a plain kilt. He even tamed his speech when the physicians and magicians of the court of Ramses could do nothing. Now Hannu wore the pleated robe and curled sandals of nobility. A scented cone sat on top of his wig. Moses' hair hung flat over his worn robe and he leaned heavily on his staff as he followed Aaron into the dark anteroom and out of the palace.

As second vizier, Hannu lived in the royal quarter but his home was modest. The surrounding wall was low and the stone front was simple white, unadorned by painted scenes typical of the quarter. He designed the anteroom to be small and low so when you walked into the less modest reception room it felt large and tall. This led to the courtyard garden and a pond filled with colorful fish surrounded by lotus blossoms. From the courtyard four hallways led to the quarters.

It was dusk as Hannu walked through the anteroom to the edge of the courtyard. His family was preparing for the evening; his wife Chiome helping his son Paneb light the lanterns as his daughter Lapis played gently on her flute. As a young lady of seven, Lapis was expected to play the end of

the day to the god Ra who would emerge in his ship the next morning to bring warm sunlight. Hannu stopped to listen before he stepped into the courtyard. He smiled and nodded in gratitude to Ra and the moon god Khonsu for helping her to get better; while daughters of nobles were expected to ease the descent of Ra into the underworld to prepare him for battle against Apophis, some of them were able to play more soothingly than others. Of course, Hannu smiled to himself, Ra was preparing for battle, some dissonance might be appropriate.

As he stepped into the courtyard Lapis quickly finished her last few notes and skipped to him, bowing and smiling as he touched her head gently. Then she looked up and wrapped her arms around him, digging her face into his chest before backing away, long braids swinging. Paneb approached Hannu unsmiling; a tall, serious young man of seventeen. He bowed and accepted the gentle touch of his father on his shaved head. Chiome, short and sweetly full figured as befits the wife of a vizier, stayed where she was and smiled, bowing as he approached and they gently touched noses. Hannu could smell meat, perhaps pork.

When he returned from his chambers to dine, he recounted the events of Moses' entrance into the palace. As

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he described Hartumn's magic duplicating the magic of Moses, Chiome and Lapis smiled and laughed with him.

"Imagine the stuttering arrogance," he said, sipping his beer, "in the presence of one touched by immortality!"

Paneb did not laugh. "If the serpent of the Hebrew ate the others, doesn't that make him stronger? Why would this make you laugh?"

"It is magic, my son, simple magic. Talking of gods is crazy, magic is the realm of men."

Paneb shook his head while the rest of his family discussed the lessons Lapis had completed. When Hannu addressed Paneb he shrugged; his silence at the table was not unusual. He attended classes at the palace and Hannu wondered if this education was making him more reticent and aloof than he might have been had he begun working at ten like most boys his age. When permitted, Paneb retreated to his quarters then climbed to the roof to watch the Nile reflect stars.

The lever on Hannu's water clock woke him before dawn. He kept quiet, careful to let Chiome sleep. When he

walked into the courtyard to lay out bread and beer for Ra he was surprised to see Paneb awake; typically, Hannu had to wake him. They sat on a wood bench facing east and thanked Ra for rising, dipping bread into beer, and tossing it into the pond where red and golden fish snapped at it.

“You had trouble sleeping last night?”

“Sometimes sleep just doesn’t happen, father.”

“Sleep is a gift of Tutu; you can’t just refuse it. To refuse a gift is not only rude but unhealthy.”

“I did not refuse. If she had visited me I’d have been happy to sleep.”

“What’s bothering you?”

He looked to his father, sipped some beer. “I wonder about that staff, the God of the Hebrews.”

Hannu stood up, shaking his head. “You worry about nonsense,” he said, walking heavily to his quarters. “Get ready, we leave shortly. Worry about your lessons, I hear your arithmetic is what should concern you. Don’t worry about some conjuror.”

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Paneb's school was attached to the palace and they typically walked together in comfortable silence. This morning Hannu walked quickly while Paneb took tentative steps as if the ground might open at his feet.

Chapter Two - Blood

Hannu stopped when he entered the anteroom. He said his morning prayer, bowed his head and entered the court. There were several seated dignitaries inside and four soldiers stood near the entrance, speaking softly. Kenna, a tall, affable general, was laughing.

“It was perfectly balanced, smooth acacia, good weight. The next time Hartumn tells me to throw my staff down I’ll see if he throws his own down first.”

The others laughed and nodded. Hannu never carried a staff; his position did not require such trappings. He turned to Kenna.

“Hartumn is a sem-priest,” Hannu said. “He keeps us holy in the eyes of Pharaoh’s ancestors. Would you truly not throw down your staff had our bridge to eternity withheld his?”

Kenna’s robe slid down his shoulder as he snapped quickly to his full height. He shrugged it back up and took a breath.

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“I would throw my staff no matter what our bridge to eternity did with his own, my lord.”

“Then what you said was a lie?”

“It was a joke, your honor.”

“A joke at the expense of divinity?”

The officers stood at attention before the second vizier. Kenna swallowed.

“I...,” he hung his head. “Forgive me your honor. It was ill conceived.”

“Conceive no other nonsense. You are an example to all who see you, even those of the same rank,” he looked around, “who should also know better.” Hannu turned and found his seat near the scribes.

Pharaoh entered from his chambers in a loin cloth and allowed himself to be dressed at the foot of the throne tower. Once his amulet was placed over his crown, he ascended the tower by a set of stairs that went around the back and sides. The day was bright but the sun was still low; Hannu watched Pharaoh’s silhouette against the open skylights as he said his prayer to Ra. When he descended the

ramp they followed Pharaoh out to the Nile. Moses and his brother stood at the river edge.

“What,” Pharaoh spoke slowly and deliberately, “do you want?”

Muttering soundlessly then looking down, Moses nodded to himself.

“It w-w-will be blood if you do not let my people go to worship our God in the distant lands for three days.”

“What will be blood?”

“The Nile.”

Someone laughed and Pharaoh smiled then spoke. “I have given you my patience as I loved you like a son, but you have used it up. You will leave now.”

Moses told his brother to hold his staff over the Nile. Hannu thought of Paneb as the water turned a strident crimson and fish thrashed at the surface. This was strong magic, he thought, perhaps Moses’ God should not be ignored. The shore erupted with screams and footsteps retreating from the defiled river.

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Hartumn walked forward and lifted a dry vessel and ordered it filled from a well. The water was drawn clear and he incanted to Heka and the vessel became filled with blood.

“Your magic is no more than mine.” Hartumn looked at Moses who replied angrily.

“Speak not to me at all and of all things not of your magic. There is no comparison to The Lord My God. Keep your council lest you be struck dead.”

Hartumn stared but was quiet. Pharaoh, having seen his magician perform the trick that Moses had performed, commanded the overseers to double the quota of bricks the Hebrews must make before he strode back into the palace.

Lapis’ exhausted sobs filled the house as Hannu entered. He followed the sound to the bath where she sat atop a bench overlooking the sunken tub filled with blood. She sat naked next to her mother, surrounded by blood-stained towels. Her flesh was white and clean but her hair was streaked with red and she sobbed as Chiome tried to comfort her.

“It will clean off, we will make you clean again my Lapis,” her mother said to her softly. Lapis wailed louder when she saw her father.

Hannu said, “I will have water brought from the purest wells in the desert to clean you.”

“NO,” she screamed, “*No father no, I am filth, it was blood, it turned to blood look.*” She pointed to the bath. “*Now get out!*” She moved to cover herself but the towels she picked up were stained and she shrieked and coughed and fell into despair. “Get out, you cannot see me like this, get out. I am filth. I am not fit for Ra or anyone. I am damned, I shall wander the land of darkness forever.” She fell back into her mother’s arms.

“You are innocent. The blood of some Hebrew God means nothing to you. You are of noble blood. You are pure and you will sleep in the house of the dead in comfort.”

“NO! Get Out!” Her eyes widened. “So it was that Moses, you laughed and he turned my bath into blood.”

“He turned the Nile into blood.”

“*He turned the Nile into blood?*”

“And we will turn it back.”

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But she moaned and rocked in her mother's arms. "Get out, get out, get out."

Hannu ordered two servants to take camels to the hills above Tanis and bring back clean water at once. They were to ride all night and be back by dawn. His other servants dug wells away from the river until clean water bubbled up. The Nile stank with blood and dead fish. The pain of this curse of blood was strong. Unable to bathe, the Egyptians were forced to wear the same clothes throughout the day. Accustomed to scrupulous cleanliness, they could not even change their loincloths, a discomfort that surely none of their gods would forgive.

The noise of the city had often been punctuated with far away cries that most Egyptians were accustomed to; the Hebrews were working to build greater cities to the glory of Pharaoh and if pain was one of the building materials, it was all the will of the gods. Now, as the Hebrews suffered the pain of Pharaoh's anger, forced under whips to double the brick quota, their cries were heard steadily and louder as the Egyptians waited for the river to cleanse itself. Pharaoh had so commanded, patience was needed.

The dead fish were buried outside the city and in two days the water flowing north from forested regions was

clearer. Pharaoh walked out to the river on the third morning. He filled his cup to the brim before a full assembly, lifted it to his lips and drank it down. Some people walked to the shore and scooped some to examine. Hesitant, they took timid sips but soon all were drinking and some laughing. The water was good. Pharaoh had saved them.

Even Lapis was able, after cleaning herself in the fine waters of Tanis, to drink but Chiome refused to order the servants to make any stew or use the water in cooking.

“Pharaoh is touched by immortality,” she told her husband, “he can eat things that would kill a mortal.”

Paneb seemed to agree, eating little and drinking some beer upon awakening then going without the whole day. The palace school was closed in these days of blood so the young man stayed alone in his chamber or on the roof. At dinner Paneb tasted a dry stick of wild celery and a water lily root then announced his return to school the next morning.

“My water clock is set,” he faced his father. “I will rise and walk with you in the morning.”

Hannu nodded. He had demanded that the school reopen; things must seem back to normal, things must *be* back to normal.

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“Can you tell me, father,” Paneb continued, “does the court believe we have seen the last of Moses?”

Lapis cried out at the mention of the Hebrew and Chiome glowered at Paneb.

“Talk of no such things at this table,” she said. “Is that clear? Are you trying to upset your sister?”

“No, no I am sorry.”

In the morning, as they walked, Paneb asked again. Hannu stopped walking and turned to him.

“He is a Hebrew and you are an Egyptian. We are not bowed slaves; we are not beholden to a God who expects magic to help his people. We are rulers and conquerors and whether or not we see Moses again is of little consequence because we will quench his stuttering fire before it can burn us.”

“Has he not already burned us?”

At dusk Lapis would not play to Ra.

Chapter Three - Frogs

The next morning when the court followed Pharaoh out to the river, Moses was there. He looked burdened, gaunt, and tired.

“Let my people go. If you refuse to let them go, He will send a plague of frogs on your whole country. The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up into your palace and your bedroom and onto your bed.”

“We have ended your river of blood.” Pharaoh sounded amused. “Why think we’ll not end your river of frogs as well?” Hannu found comfort in these words; surely the gods would protect their chosen Egyptians. He is Pharaoh, touched by immortality, unafraid.

“Stretch out your hands,” Moses said to his brother who did so.

The air filled with silence; even the flies in the river rushes stopped. There was no echoing bray of the camels, no rustle of hooves on the roads. All speech and song was sucked into a vacuum of sound. Hannu could feel the silence, it was in his fingers as he rubbed them together and

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in his hair under his scented cone. His eyes grew heavy and he imagined the goddess Serket guiding his soul past the scorpions who litter the path to paradise. But he was not dead, no one was being killed, this was simply silence, deep, thick silence. Pharaoh, my Pharaoh, stop this.

Moses leaned on his staff and the quiet grew to contain all of Egypt and the desert before Pharaoh broke it as he smiled then laughed. He lifted his hands toward Moses but before he could speak there was a small, green frog in each of them. Then another on his foot, and another. Hannu reached for the handle of his sword and a frog landed on it. The deep quiet broke and the air erupted in sound and stink and frogs were everywhere.

Pharaoh called Hartumn, "What can you do?"

"With the help of Heka and the gods I can do anything."

The leopard skin cloak of the sem-priest was crowded with them, moist and slippery and clutching at his cloak and wrists and legs. He raised his hands and frogs filled each palm. They jumped to his face, grabbing at his headdress and clinging as he beseeched Heka. Hannu watched, then looked at Pharaoh who covered his face with his hands. Hartumn spit as frogs slid into his mouth as he chanted.

Hannu closed his eyes and mouth when one jumped onto his nose. He could hear Hartumn above the shocked and terrified din of the city, beckoning Heka in words commanding attention.

“Thanks to Heka!” yelled Hartumn.

Hannu opened his eyes. At the feet of Hartumn sat a large, brown frog, croaking deeply. It opened its throat and erupted into two, then each doubled then all doubled again and again. The deeper croaks mixed in the air with the softer sounds of the small green ones and the magic cheered Hannu. Soon the field was filled with the large progeny of Heka who stood still or walked slowly while the smaller green frogs hopped over and among them.

“Do you see?” Pharaoh called to Moses, “Take your magic and leave, my Hebrews will never leave Egypt.”

“We are not your Hebrews; we are God’s Hebrews! Behold your lands awash in frogs of the Lord and heed not magic.” He looked at Hartumn. “And pity the man who would perform as God.”

The silence was no more, the din of croaking was everywhere and the wail of the people did not drown them out. At Pharaoh’s court Hannu and the ministers made plans

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for their removal, but no teams were strong or large enough to make any difference. He walked home at dusk on streets full of croaking vermin; small and green and hopping and large and brown and slow that doubled then doubled again. Hannu wished he had worn thicker sandals.

Lapis ran from the courtyard to her quarters but there was no escape. She screamed and tried to rise above the floor filled with croaking monsters green and brown. Chiome brushed them off her daughter who screamed and cried and finally exhausted herself and fell whimpering onto her bed. Chiome covered her in cloaks, but they crawled underneath, and slid and jumped on her skin.

Paneb sat motionless on the roof watching the city writhe in the midst of these creatures. He listened to the screams of people finding frogs in their food and beds as they hopped on him. They caused him no harm and, as there was no end to them, there was no point in brushing them off.

“This is cursed. We are cursed,” Paneb said to his father when he came onto the roof.

“It is magic run too far, my son. Hartumn created this, he went too far to show the futility of the magic of Moses. Fear not, Pharaoh is watching over us.”

“This is nothing of Hartumn’s. This is the Hebrew God.”

“You are a child, do not try to think as a man yet.” Hannu took a breath, sat down next to his son. “You can be wise beyond your years but not always. This will end. The power of Hartumn is that of Pharaoh and his ancestors of thousands of years. You shall see, he will end this.”

But the frogs multiplied and there was no sleep in the city as they were in beds and clothes and even the tightest drawer or vault. Every space became filled with moist, green frogs that fit everywhere. Feet stumbled over large, brown ones that plodded and doubled before one’s eyes. In the morning Hannu watched as Pharaoh summoned Hartumn while he allowed himself to be dressed, standing atop the throne tower. Even there, at that holy place of the god-king, frogs sat on the throne and bounced at Pharaoh’s feet.

Hartumn entered the court in the leopard skins of his sem-priesthood, bowed his head and approached.

“Is this your doing?” Pharaoh held out his right hand and a frog was there.

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“With the aid of Heka, yes, my Pharaoh.”

“Can you end it?”

“Such endings are harder than simple conjuring, my Pharaoh.”

“But you are working on this.”

“Yes.”

“And you do not protect yourself from this plague? Why is that?”

“How could I not suffer what my Pharaoh suffers?”

Once dressed, Pharaoh descended the ramp, watching Hartumn until he stepped on one of the frogs that littered the ramp and stumbled. He caught himself as a guard behind him reached to help. Pharaoh shook off the man’s hand then finished his descent slowly, stepping carefully.

“That is admirable,” Pharaoh replied, “that you should make yourself suffer as much as your Pharaoh does.” He walked slowly around Hartumn who pivoted to keep Pharaoh in front of him. As one touched by the gods, Pharaoh could not pass sentence in words of humans, only in actions and this action of walking around Hartumn

sentenced the magician to remain in place until he was released by the same action. Hannu realized that Pharaoh did not believe Hartumn; that he believed this curse of frogs was the Hebrew God's work. Pharaoh turned to his Vizier. "Summon Moses."

Moses was not long in showing himself.

"Pray to your Lord to take these away and I will permit your people to go to offer sacrifices."

Moses asked Pharaoh when to do this and Pharaoh said go tomorrow.

The frogs perished, large and small, dying where they sat, the floors and tables and land awash in the stink of their flesh. They were piled high into mounds that would not burn but only grew more foul. As the day ended, Hartumn, not a young man, still stood where he was sentenced, tiring. The dead vermin were being swept and shoveled into carts to clear the road as Hannu walked home.

Hannu wanted to feel relieved; it was over, whether Hartumn's curse or the Hebrew God's, the frogs were dead. The land was unburdened and there was clear water and food. At his house the servants cleaned everything. Chiome walked the halls in sandals and anklets of leather, making

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sure no corner was missed. Lapis had her feet and ankles protected as well but Paneb remained barefoot. When the bath was scrubbed, Lapis and Chiome cleaned themselves and were able to smile. Sitting at the dressing table, Lapis colored her mother then herself with azurite and fragrance. Hannu heard them as he sat with Paneb and smiled at the laughter. Then they dined on sweet fish and herbs and Lapis played her flute.

After dinner, Hannu invited Paneb to walk with him to the river. It was a clear night and the nightmare was over. Paneb rose and they put on curved tipped sandals and walked past walls so high you could not see the houses they enclosed.

“I never wanted such a high wall around my house,” Hannu said, “so uninviting. And in these days what is there to be protected from? This is not ancient Egypt; this is our modern land.”

Paneb said nothing and they got to the shore and stopped and looked up.

“Look at the Imperishable Stars,” Hannu said. “See how they chase Sah, forever chasing Sah, never catching the great Boatman. Don’t miss this lesson of the gods, my son,

as the Imperishable Stars forever circle, never setting, so does our kingdom.”

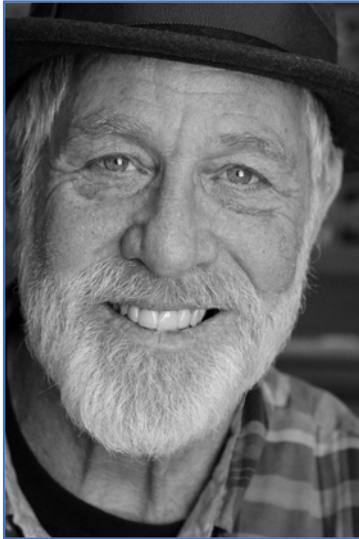
“Yes, father.”

In the morning Hannu was relieved to see Hartumn gone. It was Hartumn’s magic that caused the plague and Hartumn had ended it. When Moses came to the river to pray to His God, Pharaoh told him to stop.

“Do not bother, Moses, it was my magician’s trick gone awry but he has tamed it. The Hebrews will go nowhere.”

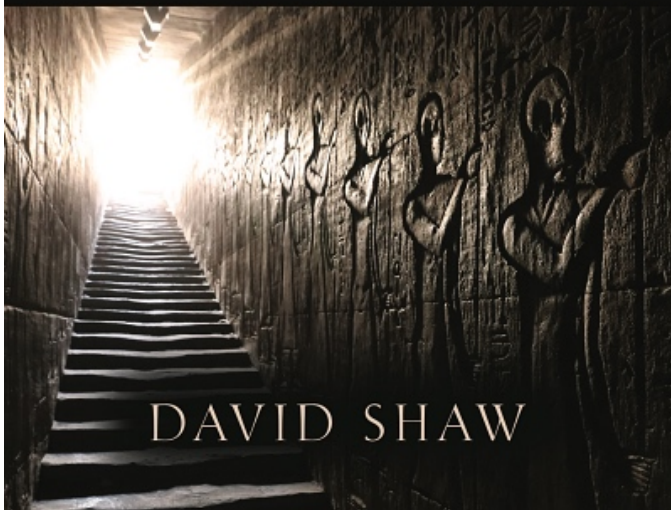
Moses looked at Pharaoh and his court behind him, some thirty men dressed in the finery of Egypt. Hannu wondered for a moment if Moses would walk to them, bow to the Pharaoh and beg forgiveness. His robe seemed more bleached and torn every time he showed himself. Could this really be what he wanted? Loved as he had once been in the palace, he could be a prince again. Moses turned and walked away, his face twisted in disappointment.

About the Author



David Shaw has written stories, articles and columns for newspapers nationwide and has been everything from a writer to a woodworker to a trucking salesman. He lives in New Jersey with his wife Elizabeth and his daughter's cat Gatsby. He can be reached at davidshawauthor@gmail.com.

THE PLAGUES OF PHARAOH



Moses demands that Pharaoh “let my people go.” Pharaoh refuses as plagues ravage his nation. When the most horrible plague is foretold, an esteemed member of Pharaoh’s court named Hannu begins a journey of courage and faith to save his nation.

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