

AN ECHO FROM ANTIQUITY

[The following piece includes the translation of a papyrus that is clearly of great antiquity. The writer seems to have been a highly-placed official at the Court of Pharaoh and witness to great and fearsome events in Egypt. It is not known with any certainty under what circumstances the papyrus was found. According to its first possessor, it was found in "Memphis" by which is probably meant the neighbourhood of the pyramids of Saqqara. In 1828, the papyrus was acquired by the Museum of Leiden in the Netherlands and it is today listed in the catalogue as Leiden 344. The papyrus is written on both sides with the face (recto) and the back (verso) differentiated by the direction of the fibre tissues. The Story of Ipuwer is written on the face; on the back is a hymn to a deity. The text is now folded into a book of seventeen pages, most of them containing fourteen lines of hieratic signs (a flowing writing used by the scribes quite different from pictorial hieroglyphics). Of the first page only a third — the left or last part of eleven lines — is preserved; pages 9 to 16 are in very bad condition — there are but a few lines at the top and bottom of the pages — and of the seventeenth page only the beginning of the first two lines remains. In 1909, the text, translated anew, was published by Alan H. Gardiner who argued that all the internal evidence of the text points to the historical character of the material. Egypt was in distress; the social system had become disorganized; violence filled the land. The rich were stripped of everything and slept in the open and the poor took their possessions. "It is no merely local disturbance that is here described, but a great and overwhelming national disaster." The papyrus is quite clearly a script of lamentations, a description of ruin and horror, and Gardiner, following Lange, interprets the text as though the words were concerning some king, blaming him for bringing confusion, insecurity and suffering to the people. But the introductory passages of the papyrus, where the author and his listeners would be likely to be mentioned, are missing. Unfortunately many words in the papyrus are still not understood fully by scholars and despite much effort some expressions and phrases can be understood only from their context. The account was apparently written after the events of which it is a record, yet some parts are written as if the happenings were being observed at the time. Thus, translation is made more difficult by the quite understandable confusion and agitation in the mind of the writer, who interjects his account with short exclamations quite out of any proper context or, it seems, even proper chronological order of events. For the benefit of today's reader, the freely adapted version given here is presented mostly in the modern style, avoiding many of the archaic forms that are in the original manuscript but the original style has been preserved where this helps to understand the document.]

[... missing ...] dare to write these things [... missing ...] But men must know what has happened in this great country. How mighty we were! And how low we are brought! All is desolation and ruin! I am witness to such happenings that when men hear

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of them, their ears will tingle and their hair will stand on end [... missing ...] seen the mighty deeds of the G-d of the Habiru. I will recount His fearsome power in the ears of my son and my son's son and tell how the Great G-d did mock our pride and haughtiness and brought us low [... missing ...] and his servants together with his people to be an example and parable to all the Children of Man for all time [... the rest of this page is not decipherable ...]

I wish I had resigned right at the start of the affair. I mean, what's the good of being Minister of Labour if no one listens to you? It is hard enough to deal with priests once they play politics, but when the King himself tries to assert himself in opposition to great forces, this is bound to lead to grave trouble.

The two visionaries who suddenly appeared ten months ago speak in the name of the G-d of the Habiru but I just could not fathom their mentality. Come to think of it, I couldn't understand anything about them. From the moment they walked into the Audience Chamber strange things started to happen. The guards later swore they had not come past them. It is a pity we did not believe them. Just now we could do with extra men, and probably they told the truth after all. There was a stable boy who claimed to have seen them come in from the Lions' Enclosure, but at the time it seemed impossible, so he was condemned too, poor fellow.

However they got in, there they were: two imposing men in tribal dress addressing His Majesty about this wild idea of a pilgrimage into the desert, of all places, to celebrate a festival in honour of their G-d, Whom we had never heard of before.

Everything went wrong from the start. I mean to say, we all know that His Majesty's wisdom is divine and all that, but what is the point in having ministers if you act without consulting them? He should never have sent those two away with a commonsense answer — they should never have been allowed to go away alive at all. Anyone could see they were dangerous, particularly the one with the stammer — the other one speaks for him. But then, when he looks at you [... the meaning here is unclear ...] you feel every single sane and rational idea you have ever had totter under his challenge. That first minute, I said to myself: he is not natural, that one; he is in league with some Great Spirit, we will not have a moment's peace as long as he is alive.

But no, His Majesty chose that very moment to assert himself as a diplomat. Well, I suppose he felt the same challenge and just had to react to it in his own royal way. But I could have told him even then that he was handling it wrongly. You can't meet that kind of thing with rational arguments. He should have refused to talk with them at all and left it to us to use the usual channels. The Workers' Council was the most wonderful instrument ever invented. We could have reasoned with them — after getting rid of the ringleaders. But no, His Majesty decided to deal with them himself. He commanded punitive extra work for the slaves — and then had them flogged when they could not get it done. Initially, he got his increased production — oh, yes! — but what good was that? Even a child could have told him that his methods would merely make things worse. His Majesty's tactics only united the workers against us and so, far from stifling the rebellion, fanned it into flame.

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When you get a King trying to battle with a visionary, and with the labour force too — why, then you can just wave goodbye to diplomacy and wise counsel and expect the worst.

And the worst came, step by inevitable step — though I must say I did not expect it to come in just this way. Ten months, by all that's holy! *[...missing and not decipherable till the end of this page ...]*

Blood is everywhere! All is ruin! Plague is throughout the land. The River is blood! Men shrink from tasting water — human beings thirst after water. That is our water! That is our happiness! What shall we do about it? All is ruin! Blood is in our water-pitchers, of wood and stone *[... missing ...]*

Then came the frogs. Frogs, frogs, frogs. Frogs everywhere. Frogs in our dinner-plates, frogs in our rooms, frogs in *[... unclear, but could be "our ovens" (?) ...]* and the noise! Noise, noise, never-ending noise! *[... missing ...]* Oh! That the earth would cease from noise, and tumult be no more! *[... missing ...]* and then lice! *[... missing and then a considerable amount of text not decipherable ...]*

The hail came, and fire. Trees are destroyed. No fruit or herb are to be found. Fire spread all over the land. Truly, gates, columns and walls are consumed by fire and no duty can be paid to the King's Treasury for the flax and the barley are all smitten and neither is there fish for the King's storehouse — the entire palace is without its revenues. To the King belong wheat and barley, geese and fish. But the fields are devastated. Truly, all grain has perished on every side, what was seen yesterday has suddenly perished and the land is left over to its weariness like after the cutting of the flax. No fruit or herbs are found: only hunger. The cattle are in a pitiful condition. All animals, their hearts weep. Cattle moan. Hail and fire have made the frightened cattle flee. Each man fetches for himself those that are branded with his name. Behold, cattle are left to stray and there is none to gather them together. Lower Egypt weeps *[... missing ...]* Truly, the land turns round as does a potter's wheel: all is ruin and horror. The towns are destroyed. Upper Egypt has become a dry waste, ruined *[... missing ...]*

We should have realized that we had lost long ago; there is not one man in the Kingdom who does not say so. Let them go! Let them perish in their precious desert if they insist! We'll be left a poor country, we'll have to call-up our own people for labour, but at least we'll live. What have we now? The towns are destroyed, even the royal Residences are overturned in a minute!

Let them go! That is what everybody says — except His Majesty. Oh, not always, to be sure! When each disaster strikes, he is reasonable enough — but only for a while. Then he thinks that he must again make a stand. "We will not give in to terrorism," he says. "We must make a stand for civilization; for reason; for the gods," says he. He declares, "The eyes of the whole world are upon us; we cannot surrender to these demands, otherwise it will be the end of order, and chaos will rule." He makes a brave stand; perhaps history will praise his superhuman courage. But as for me, whenever I hear him declare his defiance, I shudder. This struggle is

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not natural. This may be a blasphemous thought, but it seems to me that in his own way His Majesty has become just as much a tool of the strange Deity as is that man Mo-seh.

And not His Majesty alone, worse luck. We have dealt with mad kings before; nothing is easier than to arrange some accident or other if public opinion is ripe. But His Majesty is not mad, or if he is then we are too. For each time he makes his brave and noble speech, we all rally round and support him. But now I ask, where will it end? It has long stopped being politics and has become a battle of ideas [... unclear till end of page ...]

[... first part of page is missing or undecipherable ...] evil has fallen upon this land. There was a great upheaval in the Palace. No man left the Palace for [unclear, but could be "many" (?)] days and there was such a tempest that neither men, nor even the gods, could see the faces of their neighbour. The darkness came from hell and men felt the darkness.

He has made us look ridiculous; surely, that man with the strange ideas has made us foolish in the eyes of the world. And he has shown his truth clearly: a G-d Who can send hailstorms on a land that does not know rain, and cattle plagues and skin diseases, and take them away again, all at the predicted hour — in truth He does exist, and He must be obeyed.

In truth, the G-d of the Habiru is the Great G-d. He has proved His power over nature. He announced that He would destroy the gods, and He has done it. He said that all firstborns of man and beast would die at midnight, and so it was. He said that at least one person in each house will die without being ill, and it happened.

We had said in our foolishness: Surely, to believe that, is going too far! Surely He cannot make that happen — unless He is indeed supreme over men and gods, Master of death and life! [... missing ...] It all happened; it all came to pass just as had been foretold. Verily, He is the Master Controller of All.

The children of princes are dashed against the walls. Truly, the children of princes are cast out in the streets. The prison, too, it is demolished. He who places his brother in the earth [= death (?)] is everywhere. There is not one house in which there is no dead. Groaning and lamentation is throughout the land. Even they who were in the place of embalmment are laid on the high ground, for the earth has thrown them up. The statues are broken and smashed, and the temples, too [... missing ...]

They are gone — in broad daylight they went — with smoke and with fire they have departed. Behold! The fire has mounted up on high. Its burning goes ahead of them: smoke and fire go ahead of them and [... unclear, but could be "behind them" ...] too.

The land lies desolated. All who can have fled. There are no people, the land is bereft of its people and those who have remained take what they will and pillage and raise their heads high. The Residence of the King is a heap of ruins, the royal storehouses have become the common property of everyone. The roads cannot be travelled. There is no Court of Justice and

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government authority is completely shattered. The laws of the judgement-halls are thrown down, men walk upon them in public places. No craftsmen work. The chiefs of the land flee. No officers are in their right places and the remnant is like a frightened herd without a herdsman. Public offices are opened and census-lists are carried away. The desert is upon the land. How terrible it is! What am I to do? Woe to me because of my misery in these times.

His Majesty assembled his hosts and ordered them to follow him to the place called Pi-Kharoti where he said they will do battle and will have much gold and silver. But the King and his men have not returned *[...missing ...]* His Majesty leapt into the Place of the Whirlpool and was thrown by the whirlpool high in the air and thus he departed to heaven. He is no longer and has not been seen again — such a thing has never happened before.

Egypt is destroyed and all is ruin because we defied the Great G-d. Let all men read this, my wailing and my sorrow, and learn the lesson: In truth, the G-d of the Habiru is mighty and He is the G-d of all gods! *[... the rest is unclear ...]*

*Freely adapted from “Test Case” from “The Prisoner and other Tales of Faith”
by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern and published by Feldheim,
with additional material taken from the works of Immanuel Velikovsky,
in particular, the first part of his “Ages in Chaos.”*