

# Commentary

EXODUS 11:4–10a

□ According to Western intelligence (so we are told), the greatest threat facing our world is the conjunction of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

Both of these terms are disputed, of course. The nature of a WMD is to kill a very large number of people indiscriminately; but why it is that a shellful of mustard gas qualifies but a cluster bomb does not is unclear.

'Terrorism' is itself a kind of verbal WMD: it delivers an emotional and moral charge that can devastate an organisation or a cause without being at all precise.

'Either you are with us', George Bush famously declared after '9/11', 'or you are with the terrorists.' This vaguely dominical statement implied that the deliberate infliction of terror is as alien to the United States and its friends (from Algeria to Uzbekistan) as it is normal to its enemies.

Not that there have been no attempts to define what we mean by 'terrorism'. Perhaps the most important of these, published by the CIA in February, sees it as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents.'

'Those who employ terrorism, regardless of their specific secular or religious objectives, strive to subvert the rule of law and effect change through violence and fear.'<sup>1</sup>

## A RIVER OF BLOOD

It is a disconcerting thought that such a definition fits rather well the ten 'plagues' that are visited on ancient Egypt by Moses.

The very first of these,

<sup>1</sup> Its 'National Strategy for Combating Terrorism' can be downloaded from [www.cia.gov/terrorism/index.html](http://www.cia.gov/terrorism/index.html).

**M**oses said, 'Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites – not at people, not at animals – so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. Then all these officials of yours shall come down to me, and bow low to me, saying, "Leave us, you and all the people who follow you." After that I will leave.' And in hot anger he left Pharaoh.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.' Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; but the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart.

*From the New Revised Standard Version*

which reportedly turns the river Nile to blood, is not dissimilar in its dreadful impact to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The source and symbol of Egypt's security and prosperity is taken out.

Whether or not that first 'wonder' causes any deaths we are not told; but the attacks escalate – some biological, some even meteorological – until finally God unleashes 'the destroyer' (Exodus 12:23).

This unspecified agent of mass destruction is terrible both in its precision and its indiscrimination. Without fail, the firstborn and heir of every family dies. Hundreds of thousands are killed in a single night. No distinction is made between the guilty and the innocent – or those who are not free, or even able, to make moral choices.

Strangely, though the tale of the Exodus has become for us the definitive story of liberation, 'the destroyer' shows no mercy to slaves who happen not to be Israelites. Like the livestock, they seem to count only as 'hostile assets'. Not even Pharaoh's dungeon offers any protection (12:29).

How did we fail to notice until now that what Moses is engaged in is that potent

combination of terror and mass destruction? The simple answer may be that, like Bush, we tend to see the world in terms of heroes and villains – and those we 'are with' (even if they are not exactly 'with us') cannot possibly be 'with the terrorists'.

## THE RULE OF LAW

Of course, we also tend to see Moses as the legitimate leader of a great nation, engaged not in subverting the rule of law but in opposing a monstrous crime against humanity, the enslavement of his people.

Yet slavery in those days was the norm across the Near East, if not the world, accepted universally as both natural and proper. Custom and law, morality and common sense are all on Pharaoh's side. The Israelites are his property.

Nor does Moses have any objection to slavery *per se*. The code of law to which his name has become attached regulates it but certainly does not abolish it (eg Leviticus 25:44ff).

Indeed, God himself sees the Israelites' new freedom in terms of servitude: they cannot be owned by anyone else – in perpetuity, at least – because they belong to him

as slaves (Leviticus 25:55).

Moses' insistence that the Egyptians must release maybe a million slaves would seem to Pharaoh – and probably to Moses, too – as outrageous as any demand made by terrorists today.

Not surprisingly, Pharaoh is reluctant to cripple his country's economy at the behest of one man and his god. Perhaps his advisers praise him for 'refusing to give in to terrorism'. (The Bible describes it differently, as 'hardening his heart'.)

## A HOLY TERROR?

It seems incredible now that this story was once presented to Sunday schools as a straightforward tale of the Judge of all the earth doing right – an object lesson in (to borrow a phrase) infinite justice.

The fact is that its moral certainties are deeply troubling. So are the moral certainties that seem to dominate our world today. Fearsome 'wonders' have been visited on New York and Baghdad by devout men who insist that their cause is just. The innocent have died in their thousands.

And who are the heirs of Moses today? Those who like to define themselves as 'freedom-loving' regard him as the champion of that liberty Bush has described as 'God's gift to humanity'.

Those who see themselves as holy warriors honour him as the prophet who first gave the world the binding and eternal law of God.

Both alike might cite his use of violence and terror to achieve God's purposes.

One thing is sure: the Bible is no more simple in its moral certainties than the contemporary world – and if we think that either is, we will do well to think again. **Huw Spanner**