In the story of the first plague (Ex. vii 14-25) Moses is directed by YHWH to instruct Aaron with the following words:

Take your staff in your hand and stretch it out over the waters of the Egyptians, over their rivers, over their streams and over their pools, over every place, where they have in stock water that they may turn into blood and that there may be blood bekol-eres misrayim ûb sîm ûb ••• ••• ••• (Ex. vii 19).

The end of the verse, which has been left untranslated above, describes the magnitude and the range of the transformation of the water of Egypt. The meaning of bekol-eres misrayim is clear: “throughout all the land of Egypt”. The meaning of ûbāʾēšîm ûbāʾābānîm, however, is problematic. With certainty it can be maintained only that with these terms a climax must be intended. So there is reason to examine the end of Ex. vii 19.

Usually, the view is held that ēšîm and ābānîm are to be understood as vessels of wood and vessels of stone. This interpretation is found already in Targum Onqelos and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (wbn)ny X» wbn)ny ḏbn), and in the Vulgate (tam in ligneis vasis quam in saxeis). It was accepted, for instance, by mediaeval Jewish exegetes such as Ibn Ezra and Rashi and has been current up to the present. I confine myself to giving some examples of more recent translations: “even in wooden bowls and stone jars” (B. S. Childs); “et dans tout objet de bois ou de pierre” (F. Michaeli); “noch im Holzgefäss, noch im Steinzeug” (M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig in their Verdeutschung [1976]); “even in their wooden bowls and jars of stone” (The New English Bible [1970]); “tot zelfs in de houten en stenen bakken toe” (the Dutch Groot Nieuws Bijbel [1983]).

Such a translation is elucidated in various ways. Some interpreters hold themselves entitled to give a concrete picture of at least the stone vessels by referring to 19th-century travel-stories: in Cairo and elsewhere there were bowls, immured at the street corners,
which were filled with water for the poor (see, for example, C. F. Keil, W. H. Gispen; cf. A. Dillmann). Other exegetes suggest that there is an allusion to the custom of keeping muddy water in vessels in order to let it settle. They take the point of the reference to be that it is impossible to purify the water. Still other interpreters maintain the current view, but nevertheless comment upon it in a critical way: Egypt is deficient in wood; wood was expensive and rare; and so it is unlikely that vessels of wood were used extensively; “vessels of stone” are to be understood especially as “pottery” (see, for example, H. Holzinger, P. Heinisch). Such remarks undermine the current interpretation of ūbāʾēṣīm ūbāʾābānim. It is the more questionable because ēṣīm and ābānim do not have the meaning “vessels of wood” and “vessels of stone” anywhere in the O.T.

Before going further into the question, I must point out that for determining the meaning of ēṣīm and ābānim it is not relevant, in my opinion, to investigate which utensils were used by the ancient Egyptians. In picturing the plagues the author of Exodus has taken account of the effect of the description upon the people to whom he addressed his story, viz. the Israelite inhabitants of ancient Palestine. The picture has been accommodated to their manner of life. Consequently, with regard to Ex. vii 19 it is relevant to ask whether vessels of wood and stone were widely used in the households of Israel. The question must be answered in the negative. It is true that stone and wood were used together with other materials such as metal and leather for making vessels in ancient Israel, but domestic utensils were made chiefly of clay. In any event, it can be maintained that vessels of wood were not in common use. Moreover, it is unlikely that they were used for holding water.

In short, it is improbable that the end of Ex. vii 19 can be paraphrased correctly in the following way: “even in wooden bowls and jars of stone water will be turned into blood”. If such an idea were intended, no mention of wood and stone, but rather of pottery or the use of concrete terms such as kad (Gen. xxiv 14 ff., 20,43, etc.), nēbel (Isa. xxx 14, etc.), pak (1 Sam. x 1; 2 Kings ix 1,3), sappahat (1 Sam. xxv 11-12, etc.), might be expected. It should be possible to consider ūbāʾēṣīm ūbāʾābānim as an instance of merism and to interpret the expression as follows: “in all kinds of vessels, including even bowls of wood and jars of stone”. Such an inter-