



Exodus - Chapter Five

I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (continues)

Summary of Chapter Five

Moses and Aaron made their first petition to Pharaoh on behalf of God to let the Israelites make a three day journey into the wilderness to worship God. But Pharaoh did not recognise the authority of God and refused. More than that, he issued a decree that the Israelites would no longer be supplied with straw to make bricks but they must collect their own and still produce the same quota.

Despite toiling even harder the Israelites could not meet these demands and were beaten. Their supervisors made representation to Pharaoh but were called lazy because they wanted to cease work and go out to worship their God. They then complained to Moses that he had brought this calamity upon them and it was his fault they were being so badly mistreated. Hence Moses made representation to God on their behalf.

I.c Exodus 5:1-7:7 - Moses and Aaron: The Initial Request

This section describes Moses' and Aaron's initial audience and request before Pharaoh (5:1-21) and the Lord's promises and encouragement in light of the response (5:22-6:9 and 7:1-7). It also includes a genealogy of Moses and Aaron that records their particular antecedents in light of the roles that they will fill when Israel is brought out of Egypt (6:10-30).

I.c.i Exodus 5:1-23 - Bricks without Straw

Moses' and Aaron's initial audience with Pharaoh bears out what the Lord has foretold about Pharaoh's response (vv.1-19, as well as 3:19 and 4:21), and foreshadows the challenge that Moses and Aaron will face in leading the people of Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness and towards the Promised Land.

¹ Afterwards Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.”’

Exodus 5:1

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said. This confrontation took tremendous courage, and Moses and Aaron should be commended for their obedience to God in doing it. Pharaoh was nothing like a public servant; the entire public lived to serve the Pharaoh. His power and authority were supreme and there was no constitution or law or legislature higher or even remotely equal to him.

The Pharaohs were said to be the children of the sun; they were friends to the greatest gods of Egypt and sat with them in their own temples to receive worship alongside them. An inscription by a Pharaoh on an ancient Egyptian temple gives the idea: “I am that which was, and is, and shall be, and no man has lifted my veil.” The Pharaoh was more than a man; he considered himself a god, and the Egyptians agreed. Having grown up in the royal courts of Egypt, Moses knew this well; but he also knew that Pharaoh was just a man. With the authority of the living God, Moses confronted Pharaoh.

The phrase thus says the Lord introduces Moses’ and Aaron’s words when the narrative explicitly recounts:

1. The Lord’s instructions to them.
2. Their actual speech to Pharaoh.

As a statement of authority, the form of the phrase was used in the ancient Near East; note Pharaoh’s own appropriation of it in v.10. For the Hebrew prophets it became a standard reminder to both messenger and recipient that the words came from and would be acted upon by the Lord, for example: <<*In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover’*>> (Isaiah 38:1), <<*Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life*>> (Isaiah 38:5), and: <<*Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown*>> (Jeremiah 2:2).

Let my people go. The fundamental demand of God to Pharaoh through his messengers Moses and Aaron was freedom for his people. God asserted that Israel belonged to him, not Pharaoh; and therefore, that they should be free. Those who belong to God should be free, not bound. This includes being set free from the bondage of sin: <<*Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in*

the household; the son has a place there for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed>> (John 8:34-36).

² But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.’

Exodus 5:2

I do not know the Lord. Pharaoh’s response becomes thematic in the Lord’s descriptions of what the plagues are to signify for Egypt: <<*So that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God*>> (8:10b). The sense of the word know here is similar to its use in the declaration that the Lord ‘knew’ Israel’s suffering (2:25): it is not simply the knower’s cognitive recognition or acknowledgment but also the inclination or posture of the knower in relation to what is known. As Pharaoh’s opening question makes clear, i.e. Who is the Lord, that I should heed him, his statement that he does not know the Lord is as much about defiance against his claims as it is about ignorance of his identity.

Pharaoh was not the only one to question the Lord’s authority in history. Even those recently arrived in the Promised Land forgot him: <<*Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel*>> (Judges 2:10). Other examples in Scripture of people doubting they should serve God include: <<*What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit do we get if we pray to him?*>> (Job 21:15), and: <<*You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts?’*>> (Malachi 3:14).

³ Then they said, ‘The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.’

Exodus 5:3

The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us. This was a true statement and it is seen time and again that God reveals himself to some people but not to all, other than through his Word. Those who do not see or hear him for themselves are called to have faith in what has been revealed to others, especially when there is compelling evidence to support what they say. In the case of Pharaoh, surely he should have realised that Moses would not dare to come before him with such an account if it were not true but, of course, Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.

Let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God. Moses relayed the demand God first gave him back at Exodus 3:18. God presented the smaller request to Pharaoh first so that the request would be as

appealing and as easy to accept as possible. He did this so Pharaoh would have no excuse at all for refusing God and hardening his heart.

He will fall upon us with pestilence or sword. This reason is not explicitly included in the narrative of what God told Moses to say, although it is clearly implied by the authority of the Lord: Egypt will be held responsible and judged for obstructing Israel's ability to obey.

⁴ But the king of Egypt said to them, 'Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labours!'

⁵ Pharaoh continued, 'Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!' ⁶ That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, ⁷ 'You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. ⁸ But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, "Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God." ⁹ Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labour at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.'

Exodus 5:4-9

Why are you taking the people away from their work? Pharaoh not only rejected the idea of giving the Israelites three days off, he saw the request itself as a waste of good working time.

Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working! Pharaoh knew that the previous attempts to cut the population of Israel had failed. They continued to multiply. This was good for Israel, but potentially problematic for Pharaoh for, although they made an excellent slave labour force, they could also have become a formidable enemy if the opportunity had arisen.

The role of taskmasters is well known from Egyptian texts. An account from the time of Rameses II (13th Century BC) records that 40 'stable masters' were assigned a quota of 2,000 bricks. The walls of the Rekhmire Chapel in Thebes (15th Century BC) bear a famous scene that depicts the process of brick making in Egypt.

You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. Straw has an acidic content that makes the bricks stronger. The use of straw in making bricks in Egypt during this period is confirmed by archaeology. Bricks of all sorts have been found in Egypt, some with regularly chopped straw, some with rough roots and oddments, and some without

straw at all. However, these bricks were to be made with straw and having to go out to collect it for themselves would make it impossible to meet their daily quota of bricks, due simply to the lack of resources and time to complete both.

For they are lazy; that is why they cry, “Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.” Pharaoh believed that their appeal to attend the festival was just a ruse to get out of doing their work, which earned them their keep as slaves. From Pharaoh’s perspective, this was the only reason for their existence in his land.

Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labour at it and pay no attention to deceptive words. Pharaoh’s rationale was that an increased and impossible workload would help to focus their minds and keep their thoughts away from such notions as going out to a celebration of their God. He also wanted to ensure that the taskmasters were not fooled by any cries for leniency, not that they were known for their kindness: <<*Therefore thus says the Lord God of hosts: O my people, who live in Zion, do not be afraid of the Assyrians when they beat you with a rod and lift up their staff against you as the Egyptians did*>> (Isaiah 10:24).

¹⁰ So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, ‘Thus says Pharaoh, “I will not give you straw. ¹¹ Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.”’ ¹² So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw. ¹³ The taskmasters were urgent, saying, ‘Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.’ ¹⁴ And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and were asked, ‘Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?’

Exodus 5:10-14

Thus says Pharaoh. In contrast to <<*Thus says the Lord*>> in v.1, Pharaoh is both denying the power of the Lord’s words and asserting his own authority as the supreme ruler in Egypt.

I will not give you straw; your work will not be lessened in the least. The immediate effect of the work of Moses was to make it worse for Israel, not better. Confronting the evil of Egyptian bondage would not be quick or easy. This was a significant test of Moses and Israel.

The taskmasters were urgent, saying, ‘Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.’ And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten. The

freedom of all Israel was the goal; all Israel endured the difficult struggle before liberty was gained. The workers and their leaders did not confront Pharaoh, but were still connected to this work of freeing Israel from Egypt.

¹⁵ Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, ‘Why do you treat your servants like this?’ ¹⁶ No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, “Make bricks!” Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people.’ ¹⁷ He said, ‘You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, “Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.”’ ¹⁸ Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.’ ¹⁹ The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, ‘You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.’

Exodus 5:15-19

The Israelite supervisors refer to themselves before Pharaoh as your servants, which is highlighted by its repetition and stands in stark contrast to the fact that the Lord has called Israel ‘my people’ (v.1). In addition to the plagues functioning so that Egypt will know that it is the Lord who acts, the lengthy process to come is also merciful to Israel, for the people are in need of learning to trust the Lord who is at work on their behalf.

You are lazy, lazy. Pharaoh was absolutely unsympathetic and cruel. He believed the problem was that Israel was lazy; more work and harder work would cure them of laziness. Pharaoh hated Israel and wanted them in perpetual bondage to him.

You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks. Brick quotas are abundantly documented in Egypt. To fail to meet the stipulated quota would mean severe punishment either for the workers or for their supervisors.

²⁰ As they left Pharaoh, they came upon Moses and Aaron who were waiting to meet them. ²¹ They said to them, ‘The Lord look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odour with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’

Exodus 5:20-21

They came upon Moses and Aaron. The leaders of the children of Israel were not happy when they came from the presence of Pharaoh, and they thought it was all the fault of Moses and Aaron.

The Lord look upon you and judge! The anger expressed by Israel’s foremen is the second instance of resistance to Moses’ help and leadership, refer back to

2:14, and another foreshadowing of things to come, when Moses' leadership would be tested; refer, for example, to 14:11-12, 15:24, 16:2 and 17:2-3.

You have brought us into bad odour with Pharaoh. They believed this was the wrong Moses did to them. When Israel was an obedient slave to Pharaoh, they thought he was their friend. Now that the idea of freedom had entered, Pharaoh showed how he felt about them all along.

²² Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?' ²³ Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.'

Exodus 5:22-23

O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Although the Lord had promised that he would deliver his people (3:8) and that Pharaoh would resist letting them go (3:19-20 and 4:21), the shape and time frame of the events about to unfold were unknown to Moses. His first encounter with Pharaoh seemed to have mistreated or brought evil, Hebrew *ra'a'*, (the same word translated 'trouble' in v.19), by making Israel's situation and Pharaoh's disposition towards them worse than it had ever been.

Why did you ever send me? In this season of testing, the same old fears came crashing in on Moses: "I'm not the man God should send." "God will not come through." "Pharaoh and the Egyptians are too strong." There was still unbelief and lack of focus on God that had to be worked out of Moses. By the end of his life it was his faith in God that he would be remembered for: *<<By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel>>* (Hebrews 11:23-28).

You have done nothing at all to deliver your people. It seems that despite God's previous warning, something in Moses hoped that it would all come rather easy. Yet God's deliverance was real, and would soon be seen for Israel. Israel felt that it was sometimes difficult to be in God's will; but they would see how much worse it was to be against God's will.