

Exodus 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 5 But the king of Egypt said to them, Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.

And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens. The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past.

Let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them. You shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.

Let heavier work be laid on the men, that they may labour at it, and pay no regard to lying words. So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, Thus says Pharaoh, I will not give you straw.

Go and get your straw yourselves, wherever you can find it. But your work will not be reduced in the least. So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw.

[1 : 4 1] The taskmasters were urgent, saying, Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw. And the foremen of the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past?

Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, Make bricks.

And behold, your servants are beaten, but the fault is in your own people. But he said, You are idle, you are idle. That is why you say, Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.

Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks. The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks to your daily task each day.

They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh. And they said to them, The Lord look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.

[2 : 5 2] Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all.

In Exodus chapter 5, Moses and Aaron present themselves to Pharaoh. They begin, maybe on the wrong foot. God had told them to present themselves to Pharaoh with the following words, The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us, and now please let us go a three days journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.

Instead, they burst in with the words, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness. There's no mention of Moses bringing the elders with him, as he was instructed to do.

Only Aaron. Maybe Aaron does substitute for the elders. But again, it's a possibly significant divergence from God's command. They don't perform any signs at this point, nor do they present the warning about the firstborn.

Rather, they come in with a very forceful command, and then after receiving a negative response, they come back with a far more muted statement, one more in line with the original instructions.

[4 : 10] Why is the original request to have a three days journey and hold a feast? This is quite different from what actually takes place, that actually delivered from slavery in Egypt. Why mention this three day feast?

Is God trying to trick Pharaoh that they cut and run when they're in the wilderness? Or is there something more going on here? This original request is still significant. It's a request that is premised upon ownership of the people, which Pharaoh has to recognise.

God owns his people, and they're supposed to serve him. Israel is God's firstborn son, and so Pharaoh should let them go and serve their father. However, the original request holds out a different possibility for how that could have taken place.

We know the way that the story happens. We've read this story before, so we presume that the way that it happened was the way that it had to happen. But it's not necessarily the case.

Earlier on in Genesis, we've seen a procession going out of the land of Egypt, going towards Canaan, and being led by an honour guard of Egyptians. It was the burial procession for Jacob, returning Jacob to the land.

[5 : 21] And in many respects, the Exodus is a burial procession too. When they leave Egypt, they head up with the bones of Jacob. And at the very end of the book of Joshua, we have the burial of Joseph in Shechem.

Joseph is returned to the place where he was sent to by his father, where everything went wrong. And so it's a burial procession. Recognising the relationship between the Exodus and the earlier account of the burial procession of Jacob helps us to realise that the role of the Egyptians wasn't necessarily fixed.

They could have played a positive part. They could have recognised God's ownership over his people, that Israel is God's firstborn son, and recognising that, actually assist them in their calling as the firstborn son, as the Egyptians did in Genesis chapter 50.

But when they resist, the plan changes. In Genesis chapter 50, they leave their cattle and their children behind in the land of Goshen. It's quite possible that the same thing would have happened had the Egyptians been happy for them to go.

Their cattle, their possessions, and their children could have been left behind in Goshen and they could have returned. And then over time, gradually move back to the land with the blessing and support and assistance of the Egyptians.

[6 : 40] But that's not the way that things happened. Pharaoh refused to let them go and it ends up in a struggle. In the Genesis narrative, the choice is between which father will Joseph serve?

And will Pharaoh recognise that Joseph, as it were, his firstborn son, someone who's been treating as if he were his firstborn son, that his primary loyalty is to Jacob, his natural father?

If he recognises that, he lets Joseph go, he lets the firstborn son go, to honour his father. Will this Pharaoh allow Israel, the firstborn son of Yahweh, go and honour their father?

That is the question. The first Pharaoh, in the story of Joseph, set an example, a positive example of that. This Pharaoh resists that. Pharaoh's first words in the narrative are important ones.

Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice? Pharaoh sets the terms for what's going to happen next. The question to be answered is, who is the Lord that Pharaoh should obey his voice?

[7 : 47] That's going to be amply demonstrated in what happens next. The story is of God demonstrating his identity. The burning bush incident began with God declaring his name.

And as we move through the story, God is going to demonstrate who he is, that he is the God of all things. Moses seems to have come to Pharaoh with expectation that his request will receive ready response.

Even though he's been warned by God that it will not, it's something that leaves him disheartened by the end of it because Pharaoh hasn't responded. In fact, Pharaoh has responded in a very negative way by increasing the burden upon the Israelites.

There are conversations that move up and down the chain of command. So Pharaoh instructs the Egyptian taskmasters who instruct the Israelite foremen, who instruct the Israelite slaves.

And then the Israelite slaves complain to the foremen who complain to Pharaoh and also complain to Moses and Aaron. Moses then complains to the Lord.

[8 : 50] And there is a cycle of blame here that we're seeing that is significant. Pharaoh's approach is designed to discredit agitators. And it's also highlighting the fundamental conflict that's at play here.

Whom will Israel serve? This is a purpose of this chapter. It highlights the central question that Pharaoh intensifies his demands of service is a response to God's demand of service.

That Israel go and serve him in the wilderness. His response is to increase the burden of their service. This chapter also gives us a window into the form and the machinery of oppression.

Any resistance will lead to a tightened grip. And this serves to discredit agitators. And it serves to create tensions within the groups and to divide and conquer.

The Israelites and the foremen are set against each other. The foremen are set against Moses and Aaron. And there's tensions all around in the people. They can't stand together because of the way that Pharaoh had organized the structure of oppression.

[9 : 53] They have to collect stubble because straw is no longer provided. This is a far more onerous task. It's not just they're collecting straw that's readily available. They're actually getting stubble because the straw is not available.

Their request for relief is presented as rising out of laziness rather than a desire, true desire, to serve the Lord. And another thing that we're seeing here is a key theme of Exodus starting to emerge, which is the theme of Sabbath.

This is a situation of no rest, of constant work. It's all propelled by the request for a religious feast.

And the story then leads to the giving of the covenant. And the great sign of the covenant is the Sabbath, a day that is set apart for rest and for relief of those who work.

And this chapter helps us to see not just the structure of oppression, not just the way in which Pharaoh sets people at odds with each other and uses collaborators among the Israelites to cause problems.

[11 : 01] It's also setting up the question of service. Whom will the people serve? And also the question of who is the Lord? Who is the God who can make this sort of demand?

Now, Moses and Aaron go into the situation a bit brashly. They don't necessarily present Pharaoh with a reasonable basis by which he could know the one who is making this request of him.

This might not be the wisest way of approaching things. The other thing that we see is this sharp contrast between Pharaoh and the Lord starting to emerge. The chapter begins with thus says the Lord and then later on we see thus says Pharaoh.

The word of Pharaoh directly juxtaposed with the word of the Lord. A question to consider. This chapter begins with an emboldened and confident Moses and Aaron coming towards Pharaoh to present the word of God to him.

It ends with a disheartened and deflated Moses and a people that feel oppressed by even heavier burdens. Pharaoh's direct intention is to dishearten the people and to squash their spirit to ensure that they do not rise up.

[12:12] But God's actions seem to have a similar effect upon the people and upon Moses to dishearten them to make them feel that this effort is worthless. How could we contrast the way that Pharaoh tries to crush the spirit and the way that God even when he seems to dishearten his people is actually working for their good?