

something even better than the plan that man has spoilt.

We see, then, the overall unconditional nature of God's purpose with Israel. Although frequently expressed in conditional terms, and although for long periods Israel have not satisfied the conditions, yet ultimately God's express

purpose will be fulfilled. God is not forestalled by man's failure. There is no reason for complacency in any man. God's blessings are certain, but humility, faith and obedience are needed for a share in them, and Gentiles are as much at risk as the Jews of not receiving them.

(To be continued)



Exposition

EDITOR: Eric Marshall, The White House, Lynn Road, Castle Rising, King's Lynn, Norfolk, PE31 6AA. Tel./Fax 01553 631279; e-mail testimony@marshalle.co.uk

The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1-15

E. Moses and Pharaoh: first encounters—Exodus 5-6 (Part 1)

Mark Vincent

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **subsections** or **episodes** (these are typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest from the text. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional 'one-off' points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly.

Introduction

THE FIRST encounter between Moses and Pharaoh can scarcely be termed a success. On the contrary, it leads to the burdens on the Israelites being multiplied and a disillusionment on Israel's part, which comes to a head in a complaint to Moses at the end of chapter 5. What the encounter does illustrate, however, is the formidable nature of the opposition. As believers, we know the abstract theological fact that God's strength is greater than Pharaoh's; but the Israel-

ites do not yet know it, for they have slipped away from God during those long years in bondage. As readers who know the story, we know that Pharaoh's stranglehold on the people will ultimately be released; but the Israelites certainly do not know it, and the evidence seems to point the other way. The forces of sin and death are not to be underestimated.

Moses proceeds to take his people's complaints to God, and in chapter 6 God provides an answer. He reiterates His unique identification, attributes and powers, and He furnishes Moses with further details about how the conflict will unfold. Moses revisits some of the matters he had raised at the bush in Sinai, and God patiently responds once more. With this Moses is strengthened to face Pharaoh again. But before he does so (as is to be described in chapter 7), the narrative pace is halted by the insertion of a genealogy in 6:14-27.

The purpose of this is twofold. First, it identifies Moses and Aaron and situates them precisely in Israel's historical and genealogical records; it authenticates them in that sense. Second, it serves to slow down the narrative, bringing us temporarily to a halt and preparing us for a major new section in the book: the plague accounts, which begin in chapter 7. By the end of chapter 6 we shall have been introduced to the major issues that are to be played out in the ensuing chapters. The genealogy provides a struc-

tural break, a 'breather' if you like, before the plague cycle begins. It functions as a preface to the real drama that will begin in chapter 7 as the plagues unfold.

What, though, are some of the issues which come to the fore in Exodus 5 and 6? The first one is an old friend: *identity*. Moses brings to Pharaoh a word from the Lord God, an appeal to let His people journey into the wilderness to worship Him. Pharaoh immediately throws down the gauntlet in the ultimate challenge to God's authority: "Who is the LORD . . . ?" (5:2). We shall look at the implications of this question later on. He continues, "I know not the LORD", the implication being, "and if I don't know Him, then He might as well not exist". This ignorance, this refusal to recognise any authority other than his own, forms the basis for his gearing-up of the sufferings of his slaves. Ignorance forms the basis for cruelty, just as it did in chapter 1.

God's response involves a re-declaration to Moses of Who He is. In 6:2,3 God says, "I am the LORD [YHWH] . . . but by My name JEHOVAH [YHWH] was I not known [before]". This is Exodus 3 revisited and expanded. God reveals a new form of identification (or else reveals a new depth of meaning to a previously extant name), especially for the momentous event of the deliverance of His people from Egypt. This is the magnitude of that event and of Pharaoh's question about His identity.

The chapter closes with precisely the same statement from God: "I am the LORD [YHWH]" (6:29; verse 30 probably belongs with chapter 7, though we shall consider it with chapters 5 and 6 because of the convenience of the chapter divisions). In this way 6:2 and 6:29 provide a kind of frame around God's revelation in chapter 6 with their twofold "I am the LORD". In between there are another three occurrences of the declaration (vv. 6,7,8), making a total of five assertions of God's identity in the space of the eleven verses of Divine speech recorded in Exodus 6. Needless to say, the genealogy in the chapter also provides information about identity: the identity of God's servants, Moses and Aaron.

Another theme of chapters 5 and 6 is the continuing play on the idea of *service*, originally noted in 1:14 and 3:12. The Israelites are Pharaoh's servants, but God demands that they leave this service behind and come into the wilderness to serve Him (4:23). Pharaoh will have none of this, and responds by piling further bondage upon his subjects:

5:9 Let there more *work* be laid upon the men
 5:11 Yet not ought of your *work* shall be diminished
 5:15 Wherefore dealest thou thus with thy *servants*?
 5:16 There is no straw given unto thy *servants*
 5:16 Thy *servants* are beaten
 5:18 Go therefore now, and *work*
 5:21 [We are abhorred] in the eyes of . . . [Pharaoh's] *servants*
 6:5 Whom the Egyptians keep in *bondage*
 6:6 I will rid you out of their *bondage*
 6:9 Anguish of spirit, and . . . cruel *bondage*.*

Another idea which keeps recurring is that of *going*. Moses' repeated demand of Pharaoh to "Let My people go" is known to everyone. But there are several other places in which this idea of going is played on in the narrative as Pharaoh refuses his request. It becomes a dominant theme throughout the account, and in chapters 5 and 6 the occurrences are as follows:

5:1 Let My people *go*
 5:2 [Why should I] let Israel *go*? . . . neither will I let Israel *go*
 5:3 Let us *go*, we pray thee, three days journey
 5:7 Let them *go* and gather straw for themselves
 5:8 They be idle; therefore they cry, saying, Let us *go*
 5:11 *Go* ye, get you straw where ye can find it
 5:17 As 5:8
 5:18 *Go* therefore now, and work
 6:1 With a strong hand shall he let them *go*
 6:11 *Go* in, speak unto Pharaoh . . . that he let [them] *go*.†

* The table lists the occurrences of the root *a-b-d*, serve. Other vocabulary of service and slavery can be found in 5:4,5,9b,13; 6:6a,7.

† Three different Hebrew terms are translated by the English 'go' in this table. In 5:1,2; 6:1,11b the verb is literally 'send' (for example, 5:1, "Send [out] My people"). In 6:11a the verb is literally 'come'. The remaining references use the regular verb 'go'. The verbs 'go' and 'send' are particularly played upon in the plague accounts.

Three of these verses are particularly poignant, since they record Pharaoh's using of the word 'go' in an ironic sense. Moses has asked for the people of Israel to be allowed to go out of Egypt; Pharaoh responds by saying to them, in effect: 'You want to go somewhere? I'll tell you

where you can go. You can go and gather straw (5:7,11); you can go back to work (v. 18). That's all the going there will be as far as you're concerned'. This type of repetition continues through the accounts of the plagues, and emphasises the direct opposition that Pharaoh mounts to God.

First encounters

- 5:1 And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let My people go,¹ that they may hold a feast² unto Me in the wilderness.
- 5:2 And Pharaoh said, Who is the LORD,³ that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go.
- 5:3 And they said, The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the LORD our God; lest He fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword.
- 5:4 And the king of Egypt said unto them, Wherefore do ye, Moses and Aaron, let the people from their works? get you unto your burdens.
- 5:5 And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land now are many, and ye make them rest⁴ from their burdens.

Comment

The request was entirely reasonable; Egyptian annals make it plain that religious pilgrimages were to be permitted to labour gangs under Egyptian law. But Pharaoh would have none of this. His refusal is couched in terms which flaunt his challenge to God's sovereignty: "Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go" (v. 2). The implications of these words need to be explored in greater detail.

The question, "Who is the LORD . . .?", is all the more insulting given that God has just revealed Who He is in the remarkable revelation of chapters 3 and 4. Of course, Pharaoh does not know this, and by and large this is not the sort of thing that Pharaohs do know. But this is the very point. His self-proclaimed ignorance gets right to the heart of the problem of human nature, and characterises precisely the attitude of contemporary society. The world does not know God's revelation about Himself any more than Pharaoh does. He stands here as a representative for

all who reject God and His demands upon mankind.

It has been quite rightly pointed out that in Egyptian religion Pharaoh himself was considered to be divine—whether a god in his own right, or, at the very least, a representative or emanation of (a) god here on earth. Pharaoh thus refuses to accept God's authority because he is his own god and thinks himself to be divine. He thinks that he is the source of authority and is thus quite unprepared to recognise any other source of authority outside himself. Such a view is characteristic of the humanist values inculcated in modern culture. There could scarcely be a more succinct and eloquent characterisation of the intransigent and proud spirit of man than these few words of Pharaoh.

This matter of "Who is the LORD?" is of central importance from an exhortational point of view. It is the question we answer for ourselves every time we succumb to temptation or avoid it. Is the God of heaven our Lord, or are we our own? Society teaches that we should do what is right in our eyes, what feels right for us. We are told to make our own decisions, to stand up for ourselves and to do our own thing, provided that it does not interfere with anybody else. These are our rights as human beings—to choose our own destiny and to make our own rules. We should look out for ourselves, and be filled with our own interests and concerns, our own profit and advantage, just like Pharaoh. This, then, is the great challenge of discipleship. Will we, in the details of our everyday lives, accept the revelation of God, or will we persist in copying the attitude of Pharaoh? Pharaoh brings down suffering and plague upon his own head by his foolish ignorance of God's demands. This very same pattern of behaviour is the root cause of all human problems.

But we must return to the narrative. Stubborn and intractable, rebellious and selfish, Pharaoh will soon find out Who the Lord is, for He will make it plain in the wonders which will unfold. There is thus a dramatic irony in his question. If

only he had known Who the Lord was, perhaps he would not have spoken in such a hasty and arrogant manner.

The blank refusal of verse 2 notwithstanding, Moses and Aaron now repeat their request in verse 3. If we compare the request of verse 1 with that of verse 3 we discover that they are not the same. Verse 3 follows rather more precisely the wording which God had given Moses in 3:18:

- 5:1** Let My people go, that they may hold a feast unto Me in the wilderness.
- 5:3** The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the LORD our God; *lest He fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword.*
- 3:18** The LORD God of the Hebrews hath met with us: and now let us go, we beseech thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.

But even then it does not correspond exactly. They may have wondered if the reason for the king's blunt refusal was that they had not phrased

their request in quite the right way, and so they decide to follow God's original wording more closely. But having done so they then add another clause, shown above in italics: "lest He [God] fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword".

In fact it was the Egyptians, not the Israelites, upon whom the Lord would fall with pestilence and sword; but, not wishing to challenge his authority to that extent, Moses and Aaron try to appeal to his mercy. Rather than threaten him, they ask him instead to take pity on them and grant their request lest they are punished by their God.

They might as well not have bothered. If they thought he had a gentler side then they were sadly mistaken in their assessment of his character. Pharaoh has no mercy upon which they can fall; their renewed appeal shows that they did not know him any better than he knew God. God and Pharaoh are worlds apart. God looked down upon the Israelites with love and mercy; He knew their sorrows. But Pharaoh does not care. He has no time for pity. All he wants are slaves who slave and show obedience to none but him.

A tougher régime

- 5:6 And Pharaoh commanded the same day the taskmasters of the people, and their officers,⁵ saying,
- 5:7 Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves.
- 5:8 And the tale of the bricks, which they did make heretofore, ye shall lay upon them; ye shall not diminish ought thereof: for they be idle; therefore they cry, saying, Let us go and sacrifice to our God.
- 5:9 Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labour therein; and let them not regard vain words.
- 5:10 And the taskmasters of the people went out, and their officers, and they spake to the people, saying, Thus saith Pharaoh, I will not give you straw.
- 5:11 Go ye, get you straw where ye can find it: yet not ought of your work shall be diminished.
- 5:12 So the people were scattered abroad throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble instead of straw.
- 5:13 And the taskmasters hastened them, saying,

Fulfil your works, your daily tasks, as when there was straw.

- 5:14 And the officers of the children of Israel, which Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and demanded, Wherefore have ye not fulfilled your task in making brick both yesterday and to day, as heretofore?

Comment

Moses' first encounter with Pharaoh began with the announcement, "*Thus saith* the LORD God of Israel, Let My people *go*" (5:1). It is one of those powerful little details of the story that, as Pharaoh sends out his taskmasters with new instructions for the Israelites, this very language is mimicked: "*Thus saith* Pharaoh, I will not give you straw. *Go ye . . .*" (vv. 10,11). God makes a demand of Pharaoh; Pharaoh sweeps it aside and makes a demand of the Israelites in its place. The two 'Lords' are ranged one against the other as Pharaoh borrows the very introductory formula which is used to introduce God's speech time and time again throughout the Old Testament.

The issue is one of authority. Who is in control here, and whose commandments and demands will ultimately be obeyed? All the details of the story, like this one and like the play on the words 'go' and 'serve' noted in the introduction, point the reader's attention towards the great power struggle between the Lord of heaven and the lord of Egypt.

At first it seems to be Pharaoh who is winning. Things get worse before they get better as the evil king increases the burdens. Pharaoh's demands get harder and harder to satisfy as he becomes increasingly unreasonable. Just like the world in which we live, Pharaoh has little time for the spiritual requirements of the people over whom he presides. Notions about the worship of God were to him but "vain words" (v. 9). All he was interested in was the physical—that the work he demanded got done, and got done fast.

We might wonder what the spiritual lessons are behind the increasing of the burdens. Here are three not necessarily unrelated possibilities.

- God may want to emphasise to His people the awfulness of their sufferings in order to make the contrast with the liberation which He is to bring to them all the greater.
- Pharaoh, the tyrannical ruler loading ever greater burdens upon his people and making ever-increasing demands upon them, is a fitting symbol for sin and the dominion that it exercises over mankind. Sinful life gradually takes its toll upon us, and the effects of sin and corruption are ever more visible as we age and weaken. Sin does not seem too awful or its toll so heavy at first when we are young and active, but in time the limits of our human condition make themselves all too apparent. So also now the Israelite people are ever more crushed by the burdens they must face.
- The Israelites, initially expectant of a speedy deliverance and looking to God and to Moses for a solution, may need to realise that the problem they face is even greater than they had imagined. We have precisely this recognition when we first become aware of sin in our lives. We 'discover' sin, as it were, and we may come to God in search of a solution. But one of the things that we become ever more conscious of as we accept that solution is that sin is even more serious and more pervasive than we had ever realised.

There are two details in Pharaoh's new conditions which are particularly notable. First there

is the emphasis on work in 5:9: the Israelites must have more "work" laid upon them, and they must "labour" to do it. There may be an echo of the curse upon Adam in this, the one who was to labour in the sweat of his face in order to eat bread and survive. This was the bondage of corruption that had been brought into the world through sin, something from which only God could redeem.

Second, verse 12 emphasises that the Israelites were "scattered abroad" throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble. It appears that previously they had remained in one specific locality in the land of Goshen. Now they have to journey throughout Egypt as wanderers, bent double towards the ground as they gather materials for their work. Their scattering throughout the earth provides another picture of the hopelessness of human existence from which only God can redeem. It was only through the work of God's shepherd Moses that the people would be gathered together again as one and be led out of the land of Egypt. So it is also on a spiritual plane, that Christ should gather together in one body those who will be his through his sacrificial and shepherding work.

-
1. **v. 1 Let My people go.** This expression occurs nine times in total (5:1; 7:16; 8:1,20,21; 9:1,13; 10:3,4). It might be more literally rendered as "Send [out] My people".
 2. **v. 1 hold a feast.** This word refers to a sacrificial feast and is often associated with a pilgrimage to a sanctuary or holy place. In Israel's case this was, of course, Mount Sinai. Coincidentally, it is related to the Arabic word later used to describe the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.
 3. **v. 2 Who is the LORD...?** The question is found on one other occasion, Proverbs 30:9. That passage teaches that it is the kind of question we are liable to ask when rich and full.
 4. **v. 5 ye make them rest.** The word 'rest' is related to the word 'sabbath'. The sabbath is connected with God's deliverance from Egypt, and the rest that was achieved there, later in the Pentateuch (Deut. 5:12-15), in addition to its associations with God's rest at Creation (Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:11). The rest which Israel eventually did obtain from her burdens was commemorated in the sabbath.
 5. **v. 6 taskmasters and officers.** 'Taskmasters' is the term met before at 3:7. It derives from the root *nagash*, 'to oppress'. The term 'officers' comes from the root *shatar*, 'to write'. The offic-

ers were Israelites who kept logs of their responsibilities and activities (hence the root). They were directly responsible to their superi-

ors, the Egyptians (see vv. 14,20,21). We have examples of such organisational systems from Egyptian records also.