

Exodus Part Two Deliverance from Bondage

UNIT 7: THE WORLD'S OPPOSITION TO THE SERVICE OF GOD (5:1-21)

INTRODUCTION¹

Text and Textual Notes

¹ The enthusiasm of the worshipers in the preceding chapter turns sour in this one when Pharaoh refuses to cooperate. The point is clear from the chapter: when the people of God attempt to devote their full service and allegiance to God, they encounter opposition from the world. Rather than finding instant blessing and peace, they find conflict. This is the theme that will continue through the plague narratives. But what makes chapter five interesting is how the people reacted to this opposition.

There are three sections to the chapter: first, there is the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh (vv. 1-5); then there is the report of the stern opposition of the king (vv. 6-14); and finally, there is the sad account of the effect of this opposition on the people (vv.15-21).

5:1 And afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘Release² my people that they may hold a pilgrim feast³ to me in the desert.’” **5:2** But Pharaoh said, “Who is Yahweh⁴ that⁵ I should obey him⁶ by releasing⁷ Israel? I do not know Yahweh,⁸ and neither will I release Israel.” **5:3** And they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Let us go a three day journey⁹ into the desert that we may sacrifice¹⁰ to Yahweh our God, lest he strike us

² The form *shallakh*, the *piel* imperative, has been traditionally translated “let [my people] go.” The *qal* would be “send”; so the *piel* “send away, release, dismiss, discharge.” B. Jacob makes the important point for exposition: “If a person was dismissed through the use of this verb, then he ceased to be within the power or sphere of influence of the individual who had dismissed him. He was completely free and subsequently acted entirely on his own responsibility” (*Exodus*, p. 115).

³ The verb *khagag* means to hold a feast, or to go on a pilgrim feast. The Arabic cognate of the noun form is *haj*, best known for the pilgrim flight of Mohammed, the *hajira*. The form in the text, *w^eyakhoggu*, is subordinated to the imperative and thus shows the purpose of the imperative.

⁴ This is a rhetorical question, expressing doubt, or indignation or simply a negative thought that Yahweh is nothing (see *erotesis* in Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, pp. 944ff.).

⁵ The relative pronoun introduces the consecutive clause that depends on the interrogative clause (see GKC, par. 107u).

⁶ The imperfect tense here receives the classification of obligatory imperfect. The verb *shama*‘ followed by “in the voice of” is idiomatic; rather than render it “I should listen to his voice” it simply means “I should obey him.”

The construction of these clauses is similar to (ironically) the words of Moses: “Who am I that I should go?” (3:11).

⁷ The *piel* infinitive construct here has the epexegetical usage with *lamed*; it explains the verb “obey.”

⁸ This absolute statement of Pharaoh is part of a motif that will develop throughout the passages. For Pharaoh, Yahweh did not exist. So he said “I do not know Yahweh.” The point of the plagues and the exodus will be “that he might know.” He will come to know this Yahweh, but not in any pleasant way.

⁹ The word “journey” is an adverbial accusative telling the distance that Moses wanted the people to go. It is qualified by “three days.” Thus, it is not saying that they will be gone three days, but they will go on a journey that will be a three day journey. This would mean to

with pestilence or sword.”¹¹ **5:4** Then the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their labor?¹² Go to your labor.” **5:5** Now Pharaoh was thinking,¹³ “The people of the land are now many, and you are giving them rest from their labors.”

Pharaoh very clearly that they were not coming back, not if they were going to worship their God. So Moses' request is not deceptive.

¹⁰ The purpose clause here is formed with a second cohortative joined with a *waw*: “let us go . . . and let us sacrifice.” The purpose of the going was to sacrifice. And obviously, Pharaoh would only be letting them go, not letting them sacrifice.

Where did Moses get the idea that they should have a pilgrim feast and make sacrifices? God had only said they would serve Him in that mountain. In the Old Testament the pilgrim feasts to the sanctuary three times a year incorporated the ideas of serving the LORD and keeping the commands. So the words here simply use the more general idea of appearing before their God. And, they would go to the desert because there was no homeland yet. Only there could they be free.

¹¹ The last clause of this verse is rather unexpected here: “lest he meet [afflict] us with pestilence and sword.” To fail to comply with the summons of one's God was to invite such calamities. The Law would later incorporate many such things as the curses for disobedience. Moses is indicating to Pharaoh that there is more reason to fear Yahweh than Pharaoh.

¹² The clause is a rhetorical question. Pharaoh is not asking them why they do this, but rather is accusing them of doing it. He suspects their request is an attempt to get people time away from their labor: they were “removing the restraint” of the people in an effort to give them rest. Ironically, under the Law the people would be expected to cease their labor when they went to appear before their God. At any rate, it should be noted that it was not Israel who doubted that Yahweh had sent Moses--it was Pharaoh.

¹³ The text does not say that the king said this to them. This is not the kind of a thing the Pharaoh would say to Moses, and so it probably means this is what he thought or reasoned within himself. Other passages (like 3:14) show that the verb “said” can do this (Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 67).

5:6 That same day Pharaoh commanded¹⁴ the slave masters and foremen¹⁵ who were¹⁶ over the people, saying,¹⁷ **5:7** “You shall no longer¹⁸ give straw to the people for making bricks,¹⁹ as yesterday and before that; let them go²⁰ and gather straw for themselves. **5:8** But you must require²¹ of them the same quota of bricks that they were making before.²² Do not reduce it, for they are idle;²³ that is why they are crying, saying, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to our God.’ **5:9** Let the work be harder²⁴ for the men so that they will keep at it²⁵ and pay no attention to lying words.”²⁶ **5:10** So

¹⁴ Literally, “and Pharaoh commanded on that day”

¹⁵ The Greek has “scribes” for this word, perhaps thinking of those lesser officials who kept the records of the slaves and the bricks.

¹⁶ “who were” supplied

¹⁷ In verses 6-14 we have the second section of the chapter, the severe measures by the king to increase the labor and decrease the material. The emphasis in this section must be on the harsh treatment of the people and the Pharaoh’s reason for it--he accuses them of idleness because they want to go and worship. The real reason, of course, is that he wants to discredit Moses (v. 9).

¹⁸ The construction is a verbal hendiadys: *lo’ to’siphun latet* is literally, “you shall not add to give.” The imperfect tense becomes adverbial, and the infinitive becomes the main verb of the clause: “you shall no longer give.”

¹⁹ The expression “for making bricks” is made of the infinitive construct followed by its cognate accusative: *libon hall^ebenim*.

²⁰ The jussive *ye^lku* and its following sequential verb, would have the force of decree and not permission or advice. He is telling them to go and find straw or stubble for the bricks.

²¹ The verb is the *qal* imperfect of *sim*, “place, put.” The form could be an imperfect of instruction: “You shall place upon them the quota” Or, as here, it may be an obligatory imperfect: “You must place”

²² Literally, “yesterday and three days ago” or “yesterday and before that”

²³ The form *nirpim* is derived from the verb *rapah*, meaning “to be weak, to let oneself go.” They had been letting the work go, Pharaoh reasoned, and that is why they had time to think about going to worship.

²⁴ Literally, “let the work be heavy”

²⁵ The text has *w^eya’asu-bah*), “and let them work in it” or the like. The jussive forms

the slave-masters of the people and their foremen went out and spoke to the people, saying, “Thus says Pharaoh, I am not giving²⁷ you straw. **5:11** You²⁸ go and get straw for yourselves, from wherever you can²⁹ find it; yet nothing of your work will be diminished.” **5:12** So the people spread out³⁰ through all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. **5:13** And the slave masters were pressuring³¹ them, saying “Complete³² your work for each day, as when there was straw.” **5:14** And the foremen of the Israelites whom the slave masters set over them were beaten, saying, “Why did you not fulfill your quota³³ of making bricks in the past few days, yesterday, or today?”³⁴

part of the king’s decree that the men not only be required to work harder but to be doing it. B. Jacob follows Rashi’s suggestion that the verb be explained (as with Ps. 119:117) “to think over, to speak of.” That would give the idea of “let them be occupied in it.”

For a discussion of this whole section, see Kenneth Kitchen, “From the Brickfields of Egypt,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976):137-147.

²⁶ The words of Moses are here called “lying words” (*dibre-shaquer*). Here is the main reason, then, for the Pharaoh’s new policy. He wanted to discredit Moses. So the words that Moses spoke Pharaoh calls false and lying words. The world was saying that God’s word was vain and deceptive because they were calling people to a higher order. In a short time God would reveal that they are true words.

²⁷ The construction uses the negative particle with a subject suffix before the participle: *’enenni noten*, literally, “there is not I -- giving.”

²⁸ The independent personal pronoun emphasizes that the people were to get their own straw, and heightens the contrast with the king. “YOU--go and get”

²⁹ The tense in this section could be translated as the nuance of possibility: “wherever you may find it”; or nuance of potential imperfect: “wherever you are able to find any.”

³⁰ The verb *wayyapets* is from the hollow root and means “be scattered, spread abroad.”

³¹ Or, “pressed”

³² *kallu* is the *piel* imperative; the verb means “to finish, complete” in the sense of filling up the quota.

³³ Or, “your task”

³⁴ The idioms are difficult in this line, and some interpreters have spent a good deal of time trying to sort out how many days they had failed to miss the quota. The line has “yesterday and the third day, also yesterday, also today.” The first part seems to mean “three days behind

5:15³⁵ Then the foremen of the Israelites went and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, “Why are you treating³⁶ your servants this way? **5:16** There is no straw given to your servants, but we are told,³⁷ ‘Make bricks’; your servants are even³⁸ being beaten, but the fault³⁹ is with your people.” **5:17** But he said,⁴⁰ “You are idle; that is why you are saying, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to Yahweh.’ **5:18** So now, get back to work.⁴¹ Straw will not be given to you, but you must produce⁴² your quota⁴³ of bricks.” **5:19**

us” and so “a few days ago” and then “yesterday” and “today.”

³⁵ The last section of this event tells the effect of the opposition on Israel, first on the people (15-19) and then on Moses and Aaron (20,21). The immediate reaction of Israel was to cry to Pharaoh--something they would learn that should be directed to God. When Pharaoh rebuffs them harshly, then they turn bitterly against their leaders.

³⁶ The imperfect tense should be classified here with the progressive imperfect nuance, because the harsh treatment was a present reality.

³⁷ Literally, “[they] are saying to us,” the line can be rendered as a passive since there is no expressed subject for the participle.

³⁸ *hinneh* draws attention to the action reflected in the passive participle *mukkim*: “look, your servants are being beaten.”

³⁹ The word rendered “fault” is the basic Old Testament verb for “sin”--*w^ekhata’t*. The problem is that it is pointed as a perfect tense, feminine singular. Some other form of the verb would be expected, or a noun. But the basic word-group means “to err, sin, miss the mark, way, goal.” The word in this context seems to indicate that the people of Pharaoh--the slave masters--have failed to provide the straw. Hence: “fault” or “they failed.”

But, as indicated, the line is very difficult grammar, for it would literally translate: “and the fault [is with] your people.” Many commentators (so Gesenius, par. 74g) wish to emend the text to read with the Greek and the Syriac, to say, “you sin against your own people” (meaning the Israelites are his loyal subjects). Cassuto thinks it had that but was toned down a bit before Pharaoh. Nevertheless, the meaning is still clear enough: they were protesting the unfair treatment.

⁴⁰ Literally, “and he said”

⁴¹ The text simply has the two imperatives: “go, work.” They may be used together to convey one complex idea (so a use of hendiadys): “go back to work.”

⁴² The imperfect *tittenu* is here taken as an obligatory imperfect: “you must give” or “you must produce.”

The foremen of the Israelites realized⁴⁴ that they⁴⁵ were in trouble when they were told,⁴⁶ “You must not reduce the daily quota of your bricks.” **5:20** When they went out from Pharaoh, they encountered Moses and Aaron standing there to meet them.⁴⁷ **5:21** And they said to them, “May Yahweh look upon you and judge,⁴⁸ because you have made us an ill odor⁴⁹ in the opinion⁵⁰ of Pharaoh and in the opinion of his servants, so that you have put⁵¹ a sword in their hand so that they might slay us.”

Composition and Context

⁴³ B. Jacob is amazed at the wealth of this tyrant’s vocabulary in describing the work of others. Here, *token* is another word for “quota” of bricks, the fifth word used to describe their duty (*Exodus*, p. 137).

⁴⁴ The verb means “saw”; in fact, the verse begins with “and they saw.” But here it means that they perceived or understood how difficult things would be under this ruling.

⁴⁵ The text has the sign of the accusative with a suffix and then the prepositional phrase: *’otam b’ra’*, meaning something like “[they saw] them in trouble” or “themselves in trouble.” Gesenius shows a few examples where the accusative of the reflexive pronoun is represented by the sign of the accusative with a suffix, and these with marked emphasis (GKC, par. 135k).

⁴⁶ The clause “when they were told” translates *le’mor*, which usually simply means “saying.” The thing that was said was clearly the decree that was given to them.

⁴⁷ Moses and Aaron would not have gone and made an appeal to Pharaoh as these Hebrew foremen did; but they were concerned to see what might happen, and so they stationed themselves outside the palace to meet them when they came out.

⁴⁸ The foremen vent their anger now on Moses and Aaron. The two jussives express their desire that the evil these two have caused be dealt with. “May Yahweh look on you” means that He not let them go unpunished; and “may he judge” could simply mean that God should decide if they are at fault, but given the rest of their comments it is clear they want more. The second jussive could be subordinated to the first--“that he may judge [you].”

⁴⁹ “you have made our aroma stink”

⁵⁰ Literally, “in the eyes of”

⁵¹ The infinitive construct with the *lamed* (*latet*) best signifies the result of making the people stink. Because of the bad reputation they now have, Pharaoh could rather easily put them to death. The second infinitive could also be expressing result: “put a sword in their hand so that they can slay us.”

The excitement of the worshipers in the preceding section sours in this part when Pharaoh refuses to cooperate. The plot is a relatively simple one, and timeless: when the people of God attempt to devote their full service and allegiance to God, they encounter difficulties from the world. Rather than finding instant blessing and peace from their desire to serve the LORD, they find determined opposition. This is a theme that will carry throughout the plague narratives, and throughout the history of the faith. But what makes this section unique is the improper response of the people to the opposition—they apparently would rather have stayed under the normal oppression than have Moses stir up trouble by his confrontation with Pharaoh. This too is paradigmatic of many in the faith; they are satisfied with the status quo rather than step out and do the will of God where there might be friction and opposition. Well, if it is God's will for them to step out by faith, then their world will probably be disturbed anyway.

The passage falls into three basic sections. There is first the confrontation with Pharaoh where Moses details the plan for Israel (1-5). This is the most important section, because it explains Pharaoh's new plans to oppress Israel (6-14), which in turn will lead to the Israelites anger with Moses (15-21).

Exegetical Analysis

Summary

When Moses and Aaron demanded that the Israelites be set free to worship and serve their God, Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the LORD or let the people go, but instead made the labor of the people more difficult, prompting the leaders of the people to accuse Moses and Aaron of giving Pharaoh cause to destroy them.

Outline

- I. When Moses declared the word of the LORD to the king and demanded that the Israelites be set free to worship and serve their God, Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the LORD and demanded that the people get back to work (1-5).
 - A. Moses told Pharaoh that the LORD demanded that Israel be set free to worship him (1).
 - B. Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the LORD or let them go (2).

- C. Moses explained that God had met with them and required them to leave Egypt or he would deal severely with them (3).
 - D. Pharaoh accused Moses and Aaron of taking the people away from their work (4, 5).
- II. Pharaoh commanded the overseers to make the Israelites gather their own stubble to make bricks and yet meet the same quota for their labor, all of which became an impossible task (6-14).
- A. The Israelites were commanded to gather their own stubble to make the same number of bricks and to avoid listening to lies (6-9).
 - B. The slave drivers sent the Israelites all over for their stubble and beat the overseers when the people did not produce the required quota of bricks (11-14).
- III. When the Israelites who appealed to Pharaoh were told that they were idle and were to get back to work, they confronted Moses and Aaron in anger for making their situation much worse than it was (15-21).
- A. The Israelite overseers appealed to Pharaoh but were rebuked and sent back to work (15-19).
 - B. The Israelite leaders confronted Moses and Aaron for making things far worse than they were (20, 21).

Additional Resources

K. A. Kitchen, "From the Brickfields of Egypt," *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976): 137-147. M. Manis, "Biblical Politics: The Conflict Between God and Pharaoh," *Industrial Relations* 4 (1974):479-93; S. J. De Vries, "The Time Word: *Mahar* as a Key to Tradition Development," *ZAW* 87 (1975):65-79 [on 5-14].

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

I. God's plan for his people's worship and service must take priority over the world's plan for them (1-5).

Verses 1-5 record the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. It begins

with Moses' demand that Pharaoh comply with the word of the LORD. That message is essentially made up of the imperative *shalakh*, "send out," and the subordinated imperfect *weyakhoggu*, "that they may make a pilgrimage." In a word, God demanded that Pharaoh expel his—the LORD's, not Pharaoh's—people so that they might worship him in the wilderness.

The verb *khagag* is one that describes a religious pilgrimage or feast. The Arabic cognate is *haj*, better known because of the pilgrim trip of Mohammed, the *hajira*. The fact that this is a religious trip is important. It is not a visit to a shrine, a trip to church. The significance of this is that the LORD is their God. They will go to serve him, to sacrifice to him as verse 3 says. *Zabakh* is the basic term for blood sacrifice so often offered on such a pilgrim feast. To go to sacrifice to the LORD was to recognize that everything belonged to him, that the sacrifice was a token of that belief. God was calling for Israel, his people, to demonstrate where their true allegiance lay. It was not in Egypt. They had no future there. Thus, the call to go three days and sacrifice was a call to abandon any allegiance to Pharaoh.

The final clause in verse 3 is rather striking: "lest he meet us [afflict us] with pestilence or sword." I suppose one could say these are the alternatives to worship, if one understands the significance of worship as a celebration of covenant communion through sacrifice. To ignore spiritual service to one's God was to disregard covenant responsibilities. For that God would bring such calamities. Later on in the history of Israel these afflictions were sent against the people when they violated the covenant. They are included in the blessing and cursing sections of the covenant recorded in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

It is no surprise that similar plagues are inflicted on the Egyptians who hinder Israel's obeying the call.

Pharaoh's response is understandable. His question, "Who is the LORD . . . ?" (which stands in strong contrast to the LORD's "I am the LORD") is probably rhetorical. He is not asking for a point of clarification, but rather is denying the significance of the LORD. It is as if he is saying, "The LORD is nothing compared to me."

This is supported by the following qualifications, "that I should obey him" and "I do not know the LORD." He has a complete disregard for the LORD and his word. Thus, he represents the center of power of the world, i.e., the evil system that opposes

the plan of God to call out a company of worshipers.

To refuse their demand was one thing, but to accuse them of hindering the work was another that would lead to the difficulty. The world (represented here by Pharaoh) saw spiritual service to the LORD as incompatible with what he wanted--service to himself. The conflict between the power residing in Pharaoh and the challenge of Moses is emphatically pointed to in the wording of the 4th and 5th verses. Pharaoh (*par'oh*) accuses them of removing the restraint (*tapri'u < para'*) of the people in an effort to give them rest (*hishbattem < shabat*). How little did he know. Moses was going to destroy Pharaoh to lead the people out to the promised land.

*II. The evil powers in the world try to hinder the people
of God from giving all their allegiance to God (6-14).ol*

Verse 6-14 report the severe opposition of the king of Egypt, the increase of the work requirement and decrease of the material. I would stress in this section the harsh treatment of the people (*nakah*) when they failed to complete the strict demands of Pharaoh. His reason for the added opposition is that in their idleness they want to go and worship (v. 8). The real reason, of course, is to discredit Moses (v. 9).

It is interesting that this attempt to keep the people from following Moses centers on the words he spoke ("let them not regard vain words"). The challenge, then, is over the words Moses spoke, i.e., the words that God was putting in his mouth. The world said they were false, deceptive, and vain, because they called the people to a higher allegiance. The power of God would show that they were true words. Unfortunately the people, under the pressure of physical opposition, were swayed by the king.

*III. Increased opposition from the world
tests the resolve of the people of God
to follow the chosen leaders in doing the will of God (15-21).*

The last section, verses 15-21, tell the effect of the opposition on Israel (15-19), and in turn on the respect for Moses and Aaron (20, 21). The immediate reaction of Israel is that they cried to Pharaoh, something that they would learn was to be directed to God. There is still some confusion of allegiance, primarily because they feel the power of one sovereign, but only hear the call of the other. Of course Pharaoh rebuffs

them harshly (note the repetition of “idle” in v. 17) and commands them to go and work (his “go, work” will be said again in the plagues when he finally tells them to “go, serve” their God).

So Israel turns bitterly against their leaders and submits to the king of Egypt. They call for God to look on them and judge them because they made their savor to be abhorred. This aroma is a term commonly used for the sacrifices that brought a sweet aroma to the LORD. The division will follow until they sacrifice to God, for no man can serve two masters—he must be pleasing to one or the other. Their fear here is that by making them a shameful odor to Pharaoh Moses has put a sword in his hand, i.e., the power to kill them if they leave. The dilemma is that if they do not go to worship the LORD might bring the sword.

Jesus himself said he did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

CONCLUSION

The lesson of the narrative can be expressed rather simply:

***When God calls his people to leave all and follow him
he disturbs and disrupts their life in the world.***

We know from Scripture that worship is against the world because it is a celebration of victory over the world. To worship God is to transfer priorities to him, and in so doing makes the worshiper unfit for the world system. The world cannot tolerate such higher loyalties and often openly opposes them. Jesus would offer a blessing for those who suffered persecution for his name's sake, knowing that if they hated him they would his followers.

This passage provides a clear description of this tension. But it also shows how a weak faith acquiesces to the pressure. The sample is actually another negative one: do not do as they did. The people of God should obediently follow the word of the LORD when faithfully and powerfully presented to them, even if it means that they will be at odds with the world system that is opposed to God, and perhaps suffer accordingly. People need to know that there is a cost to discipleship, that it is not going to be easy, that the more they identify with the Lord, the more opposition they will receive. In our society the opposition is subtle (but Christians even submit to that

rather than stand for righteousness); in other parts of the world it is open persecution.

And those who lead the people of God better be prepared for opposition, not just from the world, but from the people of God who really do not want anyone to make waves—they have grown comfortable in the world, and they don't want to be in conflict. So the spiritual leader must make it very clear to them that God is calling them from the status quo to give their full devotion and service to him.

