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**C0609 – February 29, 2006 – Ex 5:1-6:1 – Moses’ & Aaron’s Contest with  
Pharaoh**

Last week we looked at the issues of Slavery, Freedom and Ancient Egyptian culture as an introduction to chapters 5-11 which trace YHWH’s contest with Pharaoh. The main theme of this section is the sovereign power of YHWH.

To appreciate the sovereign power of YHWH we developed the concepts of Slavery and Freedom in order to understand the slave mentality of the Hebrews. Once freed they desired to return to Egypt and live as slaves (Exod 14:12-13). YHWH had given them freedom but now they desired to be rescued from freedom! That is the mark of a true slave. They desire security in the master or the State. They fear liberty. To appreciate their freedom they would have to learn to walk by faith and rest in God’s grace rather than their human works.

Second, to appreciate the sovereign power of YHWH we developed two core principles of Ancient Egyptian culture. First, Egyptian moral philosophy stated that the greatest good was static permanence. Their greatest evil was change. No revolutions, utopias or radical changes were accepted. Thus, if Pharaoh permitted the Hebrews to go he would be committing the greatest evil in the sight of his people. Second, Egyptian art illustrates that Pharaoh was a god in Egyptian eyes. He was Horus incarnate, mediator between heaven and earth. The state was embodied in Pharaoh and as such he was the source of life and welfare as well as knowledge of the spiritual and physical realm. For a God he did not know to command him to let His people go was a direct affront to his proclaimed deity. If he let them go the Egyptians would be shattered by his insufficiency as their savior.

But that is precisely what YHWH intended to achieve. He intended to demonstrate His power as supreme to the power of Pharaoh and the demons behind their gods by

executing tremendous judgments (Exod 12:12). By shattering Egypt YHWH's name would be proclaimed throughout the earth (Exod 9:16).

## Outline

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- I. ***MOSES' & AARON'S CONTEST WITH PHARAOH (5:1-6:1)***
  - A. **YHWH's Command & Pharaoh's Response (5:1-2)**

<sup>1</sup> **And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.'"**

<sup>2</sup> **But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go."**

It is my contention that this visit to Pharaoh came by their own initiative and not YHWH's. They should have waited for a direct command (6:11). This accounts for their failure. Later they only go when YHWH commands them to go.

### Evidences They Went On Their Own Initiative

1. Moses had received a general commission but not specific instructions.
2. Aaron had not yet been given authority to speak before Pharaoh.
3. Initially they do not say what YHWH told them to say (3:18 affects doctrine of inspiration. Concept inspiration is denied. Word-for-word inspiration affirmed).

Thus, this chapter shows how failure is the result of doing *what* God wants but not *when* He wants it done. It provides an excellent example of the importance of God's timing and how when we do things on our own timing it aggravates the situation. But God ends up

using this failure to provide a stark contrast with the success that follows when they follow God's timing and God's specific instructions.

The chapter begins with the words **And afterward**, that is, after **Moses and Aaron** met with the elders of Israel, told them all that YHWH had said at the burning bush, and did the signs that YHWH had given Moses to perform (Exod 3:18). They were probably excited that the elders and people believed and out of their excitement they **came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.'"** They command Pharaoh in the name of YHWH. This is not what YHWH told them to say. They try what YHWH said in verse 3 but it was already too late, they angered Pharaoh. This command is a direct affront to the proclaimed deity and sovereignty of Pharaoh. This command is basically one concerning freedom of religion. What does Pharaoh say about freedom of religion? Will Pharaoh grant the Hebrew slaves freedom of religion? Can they freely worship **the Lord, the God of Israel**? But their approach is all wrong. They are not following YHWH's command or YHWH's timing.

**But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go."** Pharaoh's question is That it is clear that they commanded Pharaoh is seen when Pharaoh says **that I should obey His voice**. They weren't supposed to come and command Pharaoh. Pharaoh says **"Who is YHWH?" I do not know YHWH**. Pharaoh knew and respected the gods of Egypt. He even communed with them. But he did not know or respect the God of Israel. "These words ["Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD . . ."] form the motivation for the events that follow, events designed to demonstrate who the Lord is." YHWH is able to use this failure later. Thus as the plague narratives begin, the purpose of the plagues is clearly stated: 'so that the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD' (7:5). Throughout the plague narratives we see the Egyptians learning precisely this lesson (8:19; 9:20, 27; 10:7). As the narratives progress, the larger purpose also emerges. The plagues which God had sent against the Egyptians were 'to be recounted to your son and your son's son . . . so that you may know that I am the LORD' (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*). You don't know who I AM, let me show you who I AM.

Pharaoh's bold words **"and besides, I will not let Israel go"** show that even if Pharaoh did know who YHWH was he would **not let Israel go**. Pharaoh considered himself a god and he would not be dictated to by some god he did not know. However, this turns out to be a lie for when YHWH gets done destroying Egypt Pharaoh commands them to get out

of the country (cf 11:1; 12:31, 33)! Also, his response may have been partially based on the fact that there were many religious holidays celebrated in Egypt. These holidays required preparations and time off from work. They could last from 8-14 days. Some of these holidays were national and others were individual.<sup>i</sup> “So, when Moses requested time off from Pharaoh, for the Hebrews to go off and celebrate a feast to the Lord God, it is perhaps not too surprising that Pharaoh's reaction was almost 'not another holiday!’”<sup>ii</sup> But the basic problem here is that Moses and Aaron did not wait on YHWH to give them specific instructions and they did not speak what YHWH commanded Moses to speak in his earlier commission. Aaron isn't even supposed to speak before Pharaoh.

### B. Moses' and Aaron's Plea & Pharaoh's Response (5:3-5)

**<sup>3</sup> Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword."**

**<sup>4</sup> But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work? Get *back* to your labors!"**

**<sup>5</sup> Again Pharaoh said, "Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would have them cease from their labors!"**

Notice **they said**, “**The God of the Hebrews**” rather than YHWH. Now they are following God's directives in Exod 3:18. But the problem is that Pharaoh is already angry. Pharaoh said I do not know YHWH but he would know the phrase **God** (*elohim*) **of the Hebrews** since he knew that all peoples had their gods. Here Moses and Aaron request permission rather than commanding, saying, “**Please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness**. They are only asking a small favor. Pharaoh's response will reveal the condition of his heart. The purpose of the **journey** is to **sacrifice to YHWH our God**. So, here Moses and Aaron identify **YHWH** as **elohim**. This will tell Pharaoh that YHWH is the name of the God of the Hebrews.

To go and **sacrifice to YHWH** in Egypt would have offended the Egyptians so they ask to go **into the wilderness**. *First*, it would have offended them because YHWH was not an Egyptian God. *Second*, it would have offended them because many of the animals that would be used in **sacrifice** were sacred in Egypt

“The Egyptians considered sacred the lion, the ox, the ram, the wolf, the dog, the cat, the ibis, the vulture, the falcon, the hippopotamus, the crocodile, the cobra, the

dolphin, different varieties of fish, trees, and small animals, including the frog, scarab, locust, and other insects.”

Thus, they asked to go **into the wilderness** to offer their sacrifices. The overall argument is simple: our God has met with us and we only ask a small favor, that we journey three days into the wilderness<sup>iii</sup> to sacrifice to YHWH our *elohim*. If we don't go He will destroy us. We don't want to die and you don't want to lose your slave labor because that will stunt your kingdom building. So please let us go. But Pharaoh's response confirms YHWH's prediction (Exod 3:19).

Verse 4 **the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you draw the people away from their work? Get back to your labors!”** This response reveals the true condition of Pharaoh's heart. He doesn't consider Moses and Aaron as any different than regular slave laborers. However, his harsh response reveals some fear that **Moses and Aaron** are a potential problem. **Moses and Aaron** may implant dreams of deliverance in the minds of the Hebrews. Since **the people of the land are now many** if an uprising were to occur Pharaoh knows it could cause a major disruption in Egypt. Such a disruption would be considered a great evil because it would violate the static permanence of Egypt. This is why Pharaoh wants them to **get back to work!** The smartest thing for Pharaoh to do is shut down the dreams of **Moses and Aaron**.

### C. Pharaoh's Plan of Increased Labor (5:6-9)

**<sup>6</sup>So the same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters over the people and their foremen, saying,**

**<sup>7</sup>"You are no longer to give the people straw to make brick as previously; let them go and gather straw for themselves.**

**<sup>8</sup>"But the quota of bricks which they were making previously, you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it. Because they are lazy, therefore they cry out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.'**

**<sup>9</sup>"Let the labor be heavier on the men, and let them work at it so that they will pay no attention to false words."**

**So the same day.** In other words, there was no time to lose. The last thing Pharaoh needs is Moses and Aaron spreading their propaganda through the Hebrew camps, getting their hopes up, and possibly causing an upheaval. So, Pharaoh develops a plan that will turn the Hebrews against Moses and Aaron and not **pay attention to their words** (v 9).

The plan is to increase their labor. The slave system was composed of four positions; 1) Pharaoh, 2) Egyptian taskmasters, 3) Hebrew foremen, and 4) Hebrew slaves. At the present time the Egyptian **taskmasters** provided **straw** which served as a structural agent so the mud from the Nile could bind together into bricks. The bricks were then used to build structures that furthered the Pharaoh's Empire. Now they would have to **go and gather straw for themselves**. This wouldn't be so bad except for verse 8 **the quota of bricks which they were making previously, you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it**. This will mean the work days will be longer which means they will grumble and become irritable. When they find out this is because of Moses and Aaron their irritation will fall on Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh hopes to foil their plan from the start before it has time to get off the ground.

Pharaoh also says in verse 8 **they are lazy, therefore they cry out, "Let us go and sacrifice to our God."** Heartless despotic rulers often advance this reason for increasing slave labor. If they have time to dream dreams then they are lazy and need to work more.

#### **D. Implementation of the Plan (5:10-14)**

**<sup>10</sup> So the taskmasters of the people and their foremen went out and spoke to the people, saying, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I am not going to give you *any* straw.**

**<sup>11</sup> 'You go *and* get straw for yourselves wherever you can find *it*, but none of your labor will be reduced.'**"

**<sup>12</sup> So the people scattered through all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw.**

**<sup>13</sup> The taskmasters pressed them, saying, "Complete your work quota, *your* daily amount, just as when you had straw."**

**<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the foremen of the sons of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, "Why have you not completed your required amount either yesterday or today in making brick as previously?"**

The introductory formula **Thus says Pharaoh** is identical to the way Moses and Aaron introduced YHWH to Pharaoh in verse 1, **Thus says YHWH**. This was the common way of introducing a 'god'. Here it is evidence that **Pharaoh** was considered a 'god' and his word carried absolute authority.

In verse 11 Pharaoh says **go**. Moses and Aaron wanted to **go** to the wilderness but Pharaoh says **go get your own straw**. The Hebrews would have to run around Egypt and **gather stubble** which came from corn stalks after they were harvested. Because of the increase in labor the Hebrew slaves were unable to meet the quota. As a result the

**taskmasters** beat the **foremen of the sons of Israel** and asked them **"Why have you not completed your required amount either yesterday or today in making brick as previously?"** They were beaten because they were responsible for the Hebrew slaves. The obvious answer is, "it's too much work!"

#### **E. The Foremen's Plea & Pharaoh's Response (5:15-19)**

**<sup>15</sup> Then the foremen of the sons of Israel came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, "Why do you deal this way with your servants?"**

**<sup>16</sup> "There is no straw given to your servants, yet they keep saying to us, 'Make bricks!' And behold, your servants are being beaten; but it is the fault of your *own* people."**

**<sup>17</sup> But he said, "You are lazy, *very* lazy; therefore you say, 'Let us go *and* sacrifice to the LORD.'**

**<sup>18</sup> "So go now *and* work; for you will be given no straw, yet you must deliver the quota of bricks."**

**<sup>19</sup> The foremen of the sons of Israel saw that they were in trouble because they were told, "You must not reduce *your* daily amount of bricks."**

So, the foremen went to Pharaoh himself to try and figure out why he is dealing **this way with his servants**. We are your faithful servants? Why do you treat your faithful servants this way? At the end of verse 16 the foremen say **it is the fault of Pharaoh's people**. Really it's the Pharaoh's fault but out of respect they say it is his people's **fault**. If Pharaoh would re-instate his people to provide the straw then they could meet the quota. Why are you doing this to us? Here is Pharaoh's final lynchpin in his plan. Verse 17 **You are lazy, lazy, therefore you say, 'Let us go sacrifice to YHWH.'** Now the foremen know that Moses and Aaron are the real cause of their troubles. Pharaoh's plan is working just as he wanted. Now the dreams of Moses and Aaron would be rejected by the people and the static permanence in Egypt would be maintained.

Notice the way Pharaoh phrases this in verses 17-18. **you say "let us go and sacrifice. I say go now and work.** The foremen respond in verse 19 realizing **they were in trouble because** there was no way they could meet the required **daily amount of bricks**. The word **trouble** in the Hebrew is *Ra* and may deliberately be an allusion to the Egyptian god *Re*, the sun-serpent god, who was the father of Pharaoh (see Lesson 8: Slavery, Freedom, and Ancient Egypt). Thus, they may be saying that "they saw themselves in an evil plight because they had been delivered into the hands of the worshippers of the god *Re*" (Cassuto, 72).

## F. Pharaoh's Plan Succeeds (5:20-21)

**20 When they left Pharaoh's presence, they met Moses and Aaron as they were waiting for them.**

**21 They said to them, "May the LORD look upon you and judge *you*, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh's sight and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us."**

When they **left Pharaoh's presence** you know where they were heading. And they **met Moses and Aaron** as they were leaving. Apparently Moses and Aaron were going to talk to Pharaoh again. The word **met** could be translated "attacked". They could not help themselves. Their bitterness lashed out. Moses and Aaron had told them "that YHWH was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction" (4:31) but actually they had become **odious in Pharaoh's sight**. This is an interesting phrase since the eyes do not detect odor (an older Hebrew phrase that became a figure of speech). What is apparent is that Pharaoh's plan had worked. Their words were considered false by the foremen of Israel (5:9). Originally, the people believed Moses and Aaron as they told them about YHWH appearing in the burning bush and proved this by doing the three signs (Exod 4:29-31) but now that they find out that the real fault is not the Egyptians but Moses and Aaron they turn their anger toward them and fall away from their original belief and worship of YHWH. This response reminds me of one of the four responses to the gospel that our Lord taught in the parable of the four soils. In describing the second soil, Jesus said of the seed (gospel)

**Matthew 13:5-6** "Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> "But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.

The Hebrews quickly believed in Moses and Aaron and the message of deliverance. Oh, we're so excited, but when the first difficulty arises they quickly depart from their faith. Their faith had no depth.

**PRINCIPLE:** One of the responses to the gospel is immediate acceptance but at the first sign of trouble they fall away. These are professing believers. They were never rooted in the Christ of Scripture. They believed in the wrong object. False gospels are a dime-a-dozen. Only belief in the true gospel with Christ as the object results in salvation.



In verse 21 you can see their slave mentality as they call down YHWH's judgment on Moses and Aaron for making them **odious in Pharaoh's sight**. The final phrase **to put a sword in their hand to kill us** reminds us of Moses' and Aaron's original words to Pharaoh. **Moses and Aaron asked Pharaoh to let them go** lest the Lord fall upon them with pestilence or sword (5:3); but in actuality, Moses and Aaron have brought it about that the sword of Pharaoh and his servants should be drawn against them (Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of EXODUS*).

#### G. Moses Questions YHWH & YHWH Responds (5:22-6:1)

**<sup>22</sup> Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, "O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me?"**

**<sup>23</sup> "Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all."**

As a result, Moses too becomes somewhat disillusioned. Moses' faith is being tested and Moses retreats to the proper place, YHWH. He says, **"O Lord, why have you brought harm to this people?** Notice, the word **Lord** is not all caps. Moses addresses Him as *Adonai* the name of God which means "sovereignty". Moses addresses Him as the sovereign one and asks **why have you brought harm to this people?** This is the age old difficulty: If God is sovereign then why does He bring harm to His people? But notice that Moses recognizes that he's also a part of bringing harm to the people because he says **why did you ever send me?**<sup>iv</sup> Moses realized that humans are God's instruments but he does not grasp why God brings harm on His own people and why he has to be tangled up in this mess.

Moses' evidence is given in verse 23, **"Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all."** Moses presentation here before YHWH is very interesting. Moses goes back to the promises of YHWH. You promised to deliver the people, not to **harm** them! Yet YHWH had **not delivered His people at all**.

The chapter ends as if YHWH has failed. This is supposed to paint a pessimistic backdrop that serves to provide a stark contrast to YHWH's omnipotence in the following 10 plagues. YHWH appears defeated but now YHWH will defeat Pharaoh, Egypt, and the gods of Egypt and lay down fantastic revelations of His power.

**6:1 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for under compulsion he will let them go, and under compulsion he will drive them out of his land."**

YHWH's deliverance of Israel from Egypt will take place over a period of time. God reassures **Moses** that he will use **compulsion** so that Pharaoh **will let them go**. YHWH even says, by the end of my **compulsion** Pharaoh **will drive them out of his land**, another divine prediction that is fulfilled in 11:1 and 12:31, 33. The word **compulsion** is *chazaq*, a word used of YHWH hardening Pharaoh's heart in 9:12. Remember the hardening process of Pharaoh's heart.

1. Pharaoh's heart was already in a hardened state (7:13, 14, 22).
2. Pharaoh hardened his heart twice (8:15, 32) before God hardened his heart (9:12).
3. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart "strengthened" (*chazaq*) the hardness of his heart.

In the following verses YHWH will assure Moses of all that He has promised Him.

**PRINCIPLE:** God is faithful to fulfill His promises. It may not be in our time or in our way but He is always faithful to fulfill His promises in His time and in His way. We should never doubt God's word. The issue is always whether we will believe His word or not. When we doubt His word we doubt His character. We doubt that God is who He says He is. And He is the I AM, the eternally existing and boundlessly active God who intervenes in history. He is about to intervene in order to make His name known. God always wants to make His name known through us. When we walk by faith and not by sight we allow God to make Himself known in a big way since His ways of accomplishing things are contrary to human wisdom. It is always apparent that God's hand is involved when solutions arise that are contrary to the normal human wisdom of the world.

## **CONCLUSION**

The main idea of chapter 5 is that God's work must be done in God's time. Moses and Aaron jumped the gun. They became so excited when the people initially believed that they went and commanded Pharaoh to let the people go. This was not what God told Moses to say. Nor was Aaron even supposed to be there. They should have waited for further instructions. Thus, their attempts result in failure. Even when we do things in the name of God if we don't do them in God's timing they fail. In later chapters it is apparent

that they learned their lesson because they only go when YHWH says “go”. The weak faith of the Hebrew people will have to be strengthened. Here they quickly fell away, retreating to their slave mindset because of the increase in work. Moses turned to YHWH and YHWH will comfort him and assure him and remind him that Pharaoh will not let them go except by compulsion. It seems that Moses forgot that part.

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<sup>i</sup> “Exodus 5:1-5 introduces another aspect of labour in Egypt: claims for time off work, and specifically for worship or religious holidays. “Daily notes were kept for the men's attendances at work or of their absences from it. Sometimes reasons for absence are given. . . . The entire workforce might be off for up to 8 or 14 days, especially if interruptions, official holidays and 'weekends' came together. In Ancient Egypt—as elsewhere—major national festivals (usually main feasts of chief gods) were also public holidays. Then, each main city had its own holidays on main feasts of the principal local god(s). Besides all this, the royal workmen at Deir el-Medina can be seen claiming time off for all kinds of reasons, including 'offering to his god,' '(off) for his feast'; even 'brewing for his feast' or for a specific deity. Not only individuals but groups of men together could get time off for such observances. And a full-scale feast could last several days.” from footnote 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Kenneth Kitchen, "Labour Conditions in the Egypt of the Exodus," *Buried History* (September 1984): 47-48.

<sup>iii</sup> A three days journey into the wilderness implies a three days return from the wilderness. Added to this would have been time for preparations and the sacrifices themselves. The whole trip may have lasted up to two weeks.

<sup>iv</sup> This recalls Exod 4:13 where Moses said, “send the message by whomever you will”.

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