

RESETTING THE EXODUS MISSION: DECIPHERING EXODUS CHAPTER SIX

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The biblical event known as the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is described in the first 12 chapters of the Book of Exodus. In its famously concise narrative style, the text recounts the story that has inspired generations, from the arrival of the Patriarch Jacob-Israel and his family in Egypt, their enslavement by a hostile Pharaoh, their crying out to God and the commissioning by God of an 80-year-old Hebrew who had been brought up in the Egyptian court, to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the Hebrew slaves whom God calls *My people* (3:10). Chapter 5, however, ends with the entire mission in deep crisis. Not only has Moses, assisted by his older brother Aaron, failed to move Pharaoh but this absolute monarch, enraged by the sheer impudence of their demand, has decided to make the work of his slaves even more onerous. As a result, the Israelites, who earlier had greeted the news of their imminent redemption with great enthusiasm (4:31), were now thoroughly disillusioned and bitterly disappointed with Moses. Nothing expresses more powerfully the sense of failure and remorse felt by Moses at this point than his anguished cry to God:

Lord, why have you dealt ill with this people? Why have you sent me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has made things worse for this people; nor have You saved Your people, at all! (5:22)

As expected, Chapter 6 opens with God's reply, which promises more forceful action to accomplish the goals of the mission: *Now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh; for by a strong hand shall he let them go (6:1)*. What follows, however, in the remaining 29 verses of the chapter, is material that seems either repetitive or irrelevant. In this essay, I will attempt to show that the information given here by the text directly addresses the problems upset-

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ting the Israelites, and that God's instructions to Moses and Aaron are designed to clarify the division of labor between them.

What we have, then, in Chapter 6 is a much needed reappraisal and clarification of the strategy to be followed in the execution of the mission called the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

Chapter 6 consists of a total of 30 verses, including 5 (6 if 7:1 is included) separate revelatory speeches by God to Moses (one of which, significantly, is to Moses and Aaron). The first verse (6:2) contains important information to be given to the Israelites. Moses delivers this information, but *they hearkened not to Moses because of their impatience and cruel bondage* (6:9). In His second speech to Moses, God orders him to convey a message to Pharaoh, but Moses replies, *Behold, the Children of Israel have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me when I have a speech impediment?* (6:12). In His third revelation, God speaks to Moses and Aaron, but all we are given is a third-person outline of what was said: *He spoke to them regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to bring the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt* (6:13). Were any new instructions given here? From Moses' response in 6:12 it would appear that he attributed his failure to convince either the Israelites or Pharaoh to his speech defect, although (according to 6:9) the real fault lay with the Israelites, who did not "hearken" to Moses because they had lost faith in the entire project. Clearly, what was needed at this point was not just a pep talk but a broad review of the overall strategy with particular attention to the respective roles of Moses and Aaron.

Thus, in 6:13, God summons both Moses and Aaron to a special conference and *instructs them* (first) *regarding the Children of Israel*, and (secondly) *regarding Pharaoh king of Egypt*. That is to say: "We now have before us two separate problems. The first is how to regain the people's confidence in you, Moses, and in the God for whom you speak, so that they will want to follow you out of Egypt. That will be the task of Aaron, whom the people know and trust. The second is your original task, to persuade Pharaoh to release the enslaved Israelites. Where this is concerned, it is vital that you have a better understanding of the strategy to be employed."

Let us return to the beginning of Chapter 6. Already, in the last few words of God's reply to the anguished plea of Moses, there is a hint of a new strategy: *by a strong hand shall he let them go, and by a strong hand shall he drive*

them out of his land (6:1). The strategy will no longer be based upon arguments or winning Pharaoh's sympathy but on the compelling force of physical blows. As for the Israelites, whether they like it or not, they will be "driven out" of Egypt. There then follow, in an eight-verse speech by God, several vital disclosures: that different aspects of God's actions are reflected in His different names; that the Israelites escaping from Egyptian servitude are to enter into a permanent covenantal relationship with God; and that they are to become a special people living in a land of their own. Also, the people must be prepared to experience aspects of God not seen by the Patriarchs, a God who acts in real time, upsetting international balances of power to bring about the fulfillment of promises made to the Patriarchs. They are to learn that God's actions are not only punitive, but are also designed to implant knowledge of the unique nature of the One God, Lord of nature and history. The people are to realize that their redemption will not come about abruptly, in one fell swoop, but in stages: *I will bring you out from under . . . I will deliver you . . . I will redeem you . . . I will take you to Me for a people . . . I will bring you into the land* (6:6-8). According to the Rabbis, the first four expressions reflect four different phases in which the burdens of slavery were gradually eased. Although, at that moment, the Israelites are not prepared to listen to this important information (6:9), it will become the task of Aaron to circulate these teachings among them. A grasp of the above fundamentals will give the people a deeper understanding of the magnitude and significance of their liberation, enabling them to deal better with their anger and bewilderment.

Then, without any break or introduction, verse 6:14 begins, *These are the heads of their fathers' houses: the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel*, continues with the genealogy of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi up to the birth of Aaron and Moses to Amram and Jochebed, and ends with the children and grandson of Aaron (6:25).

This partial and seemingly irrelevant genealogy concludes with the following statement: *These are the same Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said, 'Bring forth the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt' . . . It was they who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring out the Children of Israel from Egypt. These are the same Moses and Aaron* (6:26-27). This section, too, must be seen as a response to the questions and objections raised by the Isra-

elites concerning their redemption. The people were all, of course, familiar with Aaron, who had been serving for years as one of their elders. Moses, however, presented a problem. He was said to be the long-lost brother of Aaron. But who could credit the wild story of how he was saved from the genocidal decree of the previous Pharaoh! Besides, he had never shared their suffering. In order, therefore, to establish the legitimacy of Moses, the text cites what must have been recorded in some official archives to trace Moses' Israelite origins.

Realizing that the Israelites' disillusionment with the whole idea of liberation had become a major problem, Aaron, whom the Israelites viewed as a fellow victim of the Egyptian travail, was given the special task of speaking to them. Thus, when the identifications are made in Exodus 6:26, where the emphasis is on *bringing the Children of Israel out of Egypt*, Aaron is placed before Moses, since his task was to win over the Israelites. However, in 6:27, where the requirement is *speaking to Pharaoh*, the verse concludes with Moses and Aaron, since it is Moses who must undertake this task.

Having addressed the problem created by the Israelites' disinclination to leave, God now turns to Moses' problem with Pharaoh. In His fourth and final conversation with Moses in Chapter 6, God seems merely to repeat His command: *Speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I tell you* (6:29). Moses responds with his usual feeling of inadequacy: *See, I am of impeded speech, how then shall Pharaoh listen to me?* (6:30). Moses overlooks the new element in God's instruction, that he does not have to embellish or transform God's demands into persuasive arguments, but need only repeat the word of God verbatim. This is explained in His reply to Moses: *Look, I have set you in God's role to Pharaoh and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. You shall say all that I command you; and Aaron your brother will speak to Pharaoh* (7:1-2). The new arrangement, which appears to satisfy Moses, is that his role in future appearances before Pharaoh will be that of a divine oracle. From his lips will come only the precise words he hears from God. Aaron will then relay and interpret the message. Aaron's role as a "prophet" is that of a spokesman, the term *navi* (prophet) being derived from *niv* (locution). God then proceeds to explain the unusual nature of the ensuing campaign. God will *multiply His signs and wonders*, but Pharaoh will pay no heed! Ultimately, however, *My people, the Children of Israel*, will go forth out of

Egypt and, equally important, *the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord* (7:3-5).

Moses and Aaron now have a better grasp of their respective assignments. The people of Israel also come to understand the meaning of their servitude and the aim of prolonged negotiations with Pharaoh, to demonstrate the power of God. The crisis is over. The historic event known as the Exodus is back on track. *Moses and Aaron did so; as the Lord commanded them, so they did* (7:6).



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