

## HOW CHAPTER SIX PUT THE EXODUS BACK ON TRACK

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At the end of chapter five in the Book of Exodus, the entire mission of Moses and Aaron to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage seems to be in serious jeopardy. Pharaoh has emphatically refused to permit his Hebrew slaves to leave (Ex. 5:2), the Israelites had lost faith in Moses and his redeeming God (Ex. 5:19). Most worrisome of all, Moses himself bitterly complains to God: *Lord why have you dealt so badly with your people. Why have you sent me?*" *You have not delivered your people as you said* (Ex. 5:21). Yet already by Exodus 7:6, the problems seem to have vanished and the familiar events known as the Exodus are proceeding as planned. Presumably, therefore, what God tells Moses and Aaron in chapter six sets things right. However, to the casual reader this is not at all clear, as he begins the chapter. After God's lengthy address to Moses (Ex. 6:2-8) that contains important information about the forthcoming redemption, which Moses conveys to the people, we are told *but they hearkened not unto Moses because of their impatience of spirit and the cruel bondage* (Ex. 6:9). Moreover, after two new commands by God to speak to Pharaoh, Moses, surprisingly, responds each time by saying that his speech difficulties make him unsuitable for the task. *Behold I am of uncircumcised lips and how shall Pharaoh hearken to me?* (Ex. 6:12; 6:30). But surely the matter had been resolved earlier when Moses was first charged with the mission and Aaron had been brought in to serve as Moses' spokesman (Ex. 4:95). Evidently Moses saw the failure of their initial appearance before Pharaoh as evidence that their manner of presentation was not effective. They were not getting through. What had gone wrong?

In what follows I shall argue that the difficulties described in Exodus 5 were the consequence of misunderstandings on the part of Moses and Aaron

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which were corrected by the information contained in verses Exodus 6:13 and 7:1,2. The first misunderstanding involved the respective roles of Moses and Aaron. While, as we noted, Aaron was originally brought in as Moses' spokesman to Pharaoh, his actual role was as Moses' contact with the enslaved Israelites. This is borne out by the initial successful meeting between Moses and Aaron and the elders of Israel which is described as follows: *And Aaron spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moses* (Ex.5:30). While the deafness of the people described in Exodus 6:9 was ascribed to their cruel condition, the fact that it was Moses who spoke to them is also significant. It was to be expected that the people would relate more positively to Aaron, a familiar and beloved figure who had been with them in their suffering, whereas this Moses was associated with a vague rumor of a Hebrew foundling living a pampered life at court who had not been seen for half a century.<sup>1</sup> This problem is addressed in Exodus 6:13: *And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron and charged them [va-ye-tza-vaim] to the children of Israel and to Pharaoh King of Egypt...* That is to say there are two separate tasks requiring different approaches and different agents in order to achieve the single goal of bringing the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. The Israelites have to be reassured that where they are going will be better than where they have been and for this Aaron is best suited. However, dealing with Pharaoh is more complex than previously thought. What is required is not merely a matter of delivering a message, but a performance by means of which Pharaoh and his court will become convinced that these two old men truly speak in the name of the One and Only God.

This explains why later in referring to these different components of the Exodus, Exodus 6:27 when speaking of *bringing out the children of Israel* says of the leaders *these are that Aaron and Moses*, but when speaking of those that spoke to Pharaoh, the order is reversed, *these are that Moses and Aaron*.

The second misunderstanding seems to have involved Moses' speech impediment<sup>2</sup> and the manner by which and by whom the demand for liberation be presented to Pharaoh. A look back at God's original response to Moses' reference to his speech problem shows it to be more complex than we

first thought. Actually, the response contains three independent considerations which lend themselves to three different procedures.

1) Exodus 4: 11,12 suggests that Moses ignore his speech problems and simply rely on God to put the right words in his mouth and for their proper pronouncement.

2) Exodus 4:15 mandates that Moses should do the above with Aaron at his side to assist, as God may inspire both of them.

3) Exodus 4:16 introduces a new and mysterious element, *He shall be to you for a mouth and you will be to him for a God*. What does that mean and how is it to be implemented?

Evidently Moses had understood these original instructions in a way similar to our second interpretation above. If our reading is correct, how does God's final statement to Moses clarify his misunderstanding? *See I have sent you to be for a god to Pharaoh and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you and Aaron your brother shall speak unto Pharaoh* (Ex. 7:1,2).

What is noteworthy here is the use of the same expression we found mysterious in Exodus 4:16, *you shall be for a god*. However, there are two significant differences. In Exodus 4:16, the text reads *You shall be to him* (Aaron) *for a god*, while here (Ex. 7:1,2) it is *to be for a god to Pharaoh*. Also, in Exodus 4:16, Aaron is said to be *your* (Moses) *spokesman*, while here he is called *your prophet*. How does this solve the problem? What is the meaning of "being for a god"? What is the proper procedure to be followed in appearing before Pharaoh?

In Biblical prophecy, hearing the actual sound of the words coming from the mouth of an authentic prophet was believed to have a unique power of persuasion and even of self-fulfillment.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in his clarification in Exodus 7:1,2, God commands that in standing before Pharaoh, Moses, in the presence of Aaron and the Egyptians, speak whatever and however the spirit of God prompts him to say. On the assumption that all may not be intelligible to Pharaoh, Aaron, who is also under Divine inspiration, is to explain or elucidate as he feels necessary. In this way, Pharaoh and his court are witnesses to the living prophetic- process which lends credence to Moses and Aarons' claim that they speak the words of a powerful deity.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, we have offered readings of Exodus 6:13 and Exodus 7:1,2 which show them to be corrections of the misunderstandings involved in the problems described in Exodus 5 which were, the proper roles of Moses and Aaron and how the presentation is to be made to Pharaoh.

#### NOTES

1. In God's original proposal to enlist Aaron, it is said *and he shall be your spokesman to the people* (Ex. 4:16).
2. Much has been written on what may have been Moses' actual speech problem. See the article by L. Ben-Nun, *Harefuah* 1, June 1999, 11.
3. See Isaiah 55:11, *So shall be My word that goes out of My mouth: it shall not return to Me empty without accomplishing that which I want and make the thing where I sent it, prosper.*
- 4 In antiquity people were accustomed to hearing the message of the Oracle interpreted by the priest or priestess. See M. Scott, *Delphi: A History of the Center of the Ancient World* (Princeton University Press, 2014).



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