

OpenTheo

February 26th: Exodus 5 & Matthew 11

February 25, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh the first time. John the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 3:18 (three days' journey into the wilderness to worship); Genesis 50 (the burial procession of Jacob); Genesis 50:25, Exodus 13:19, Joshua 24:32 (the bones of Joseph and the Exodus).

Isaiah 35:3-5, 61:1-4 (restoration and vengeance); 1 Kings 14:15 (a shaken reed); 1 Kings 19:15-17 (Elisha's ministry foretold to Elijah); Malachi 4:5-6 (ministry of a coming Elijah foretold); Isaiah 14:13-14 (king of Babylon lifted up to heaven, but will be brought down to Sheol); Exodus 33:14 (promise of rest); Sirach 51:23-27, Proverbs 9:1-6 (Wisdom's invitation); Isaiah 55:1-3 (invitation of YHWH).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Exodus 5 Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, the

God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness. But Pharaoh said, Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go. 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, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword. But the king of Egypt said to them, Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens. And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens.

The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people and their foremen, You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past. Let them go and gather straw for themselves, but the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them. You shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle.

Therefore they cry, Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God. Let heavier work be laid on the men, that they may labour at it, and pay no regard to lying words. So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, Thus says Pharaoh, I will not give you straw.

Go and get your straw yourselves, wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least. So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, Complete your work, your daily task each day, as when there was straw.

And the foremen of the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past? Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, Make bricks. And behold, your servants are beaten, but the fault is in your own people. But he said, You are idle, you are idle.

That is why you say, Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord. Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks.

The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks to your daily task each day. They met Moses and Aaron who were waiting for them as they came out from Pharaoh. And they said to them, The Lord look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.

Then Moses turned to the Lord and said, O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has

done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all. In Exodus chapter 5, Moses and Aaron present themselves to Pharaoh. They begin, maybe on the wrong foot.

God had told them to present themselves to Pharaoh with the following words, The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us, and now please let us go a three days journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God. Instead they burst in with the words, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness. There's no mention of Moses bringing the elders with him as he was instructed to do.

Only Aaron. Maybe Aaron does substitute for the elders. But again, it's a possibly significant divergence from God's command.

They don't perform any signs at this point, nor do they present the warning about the firstborn. Rather they come in with a very forceful command, and then after receiving a negative response, they come back with a far more muted statement. One more in line with the original instructions.

This is quite different from what actually takes place, that actually delivered from slavery in Egypt. Why mention this three day feast? Is God trying to trick Pharaoh that they cut and run when they're in the wilderness? Or is there something more going on here? This original request is still significant. It's a request that is premised upon ownership of the people, which Pharaoh has to recognize.

God owns his people, and they're supposed to serve him. Israel is God's firstborn son, and so Pharaoh should let them go and serve their father. However, the original request holds out a different possibility for how that could have taken place.

We know the way that the story happens. We've read this story before, so we presume that the way that it happened was the way that it had to happen. But it's not necessarily the case.

Earlier on in Genesis, we've seen a procession going out of the land of Egypt, going towards Canaan, and being led by an honor guard of Egyptians. It was the burial procession for Jacob, returning Jacob to the land. And in many respects, the Exodus is a burial procession too.

When they leave Egypt, they head up with the bones of Jacob. And at the very end of the book of Joshua, we have the burial of Joseph in Shechem. Joseph is returned to the place where he was sent to by his father, where everything went wrong.

And so it's a burial procession. Recognizing the relationship between the Exodus and the earlier account of the burial procession of Jacob helps us to realize that the role of the Egyptians wasn't necessarily fixed. They could have played a positive part.

They could have recognized God's ownership over his people, that Israel is God's firstborn son, and recognizing that actually assists them in their calling as the firstborn son, as the Egyptians did in Genesis chapter 50. But when they resist, the plan changes. In Genesis chapter 50, they leave their cattle and their children behind in the land of Goshen.

It's quite possible that the same thing would have happened had the Egyptians been happy for them to go. Their cattle, their possessions, and their children could have been left behind in Goshen, and they could have returned, and then over time, gradually moved back to the land with the blessing and support and assistance of the Egyptians. But that's not the way that things happened.

Pharaoh refused to let them go, and it ends up in a struggle. In the Genesis narrative, the choice is between which father will Joseph serve? And will Pharaoh recognize that Joseph, as it were his firstborn son, someone he's been treating as if he were his firstborn son, that his primary loyalty is to Jacob, his natural father? If he recognizes that, he lets Joseph go, he lets the firstborn son go to honour his father. Will this Pharaoh allow Israel, the firstborn son of Yahweh, go and honour their father? That is the question.

The first Pharaoh in the story of Joseph set an example, a positive example of that. This Pharaoh resists that. Pharaoh's first words in the narrative are important ones.

Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice? Pharaoh sets the terms for what's going to happen next. The question to be answered is, who is the Lord that Pharaoh should obey his voice? That's going to be amply demonstrated in what happens next. The story is of God demonstrating his identity.

The burning bush incident began with God declaring his name, and as we move through the story, God is going to demonstrate who he is, that he is the God of all things. Moses seems to have come to Pharaoh with expectation that his request will receive ready response. Even though he's been warned by God that it will not, it's something that leaves him disheartened by the end of it, because Pharaoh hasn't responded.

In fact, Pharaoh has responded in a very negative way, by increasing the burden upon the Israelites. There are conversations that move up and down the chain of command. So Pharaoh instructs the Egyptian taskmasters, who instruct the Israelite foremen, who instruct the Israelite slaves.

And then the Israelite slaves complain to the foremen, who complain to Pharaoh, and also complain to Moses and Aaron. Moses then complains to the Lord. And there is a cycle of blame here that we're seeing that is significant.

Pharaoh's approach is designed to discredit agitators. And it's also highlighting the fundamental conflict that's at play here. Whom will Israel serve? This is a purpose of this

chapter.

It highlights the central question, that Pharaoh intensifies his demands of service, is a response to God's demand of service. That Israel go and serve him in the wilderness. His response is to increase the burden of their service.

This chapter also gives us a window into the form and the machinery of oppression. Any resistance will lead to a tightened grip. And this serves to discredit agitators.

And it serves to create tensions within the groups, and to divide and conquer. The Israelites and the foremen are set against each other. The foremen are set against Moses and Aaron.

And there's tensions all around in the people. They can't stand together, because of the way that Pharaoh had organised the structure of oppression. They have to collect stubble, because straw is no longer provided.

This is a far more onerous task. It's not just that they're collecting straw that's readily available. They're actually getting stubble, because the straw is not available.

Their request for relief is presented as rising out of laziness, rather than a desire, true desire, to serve the Lord. And another thing that we're seeing here is a key theme of Exodus starting to emerge, which is the theme of Sabbath. This is a situation of no rest, of constant work.

It's all propelled by the request for a religious feast. And the story then leads to the giving of the covenant. And the great sign of the covenant is the Sabbath, a day that is set apart for rest and for relief of those who work.

And this chapter helps us to see not just the structure of oppression, not just the way in which Pharaoh sets people at odds with each other, and uses collaborators among the Israelites to cause problems. It's also setting up the question of service. Whom will the people serve? And also the question of who is the Lord? Who is the God who can make this sort of demand? Now Moses and Aaron go into the situation a bit brashly.

They don't necessarily present Pharaoh with a reasonable basis by which he could know the one who is making this request of him. This might not be the wisest way of approaching things. The other thing that we see is this sharp contrast between Pharaoh and the Lord starting to emerge.

The chapter begins with, Thus says the Lord, and then later on we see, Thus says Pharaoh. The word of Pharaoh directly juxtaposed with the word of the Lord. A question to consider.

This chapter begins with an emboldened and confident Moses and Aaron coming towards

Pharaoh to present the word of God to him. It ends with a disheartened and deflated Moses and a people that feel oppressed by even heavier burdens. Pharaoh's direct intention is to dishearten the people and to squash their spirit to ensure that they do not rise up.

But God's actions seem to have a similar effect upon the people and upon Moses to dishearten them, to make them feel that this effort is worthless. How could we contrast the way that Pharaoh tries to crush the spirit and the way that God, even when he seems to dishearten his people, is actually working for their good? Matthew chapter 11 And the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.

Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.

For all the prophets and the law prophesied and told John, And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.

We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon. The son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds. Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Besseder! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, they would have remained until this day.

But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you. At that time Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and have revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

In Matthew chapter 11, the twelve disciples have been sent away, and Jesus is continuing his ministry. John has heard the accounts of Jesus' ministry, but is himself in prison. John the Baptist preached an imminent judgement, but Jesus is healing and restoring people, and you can imagine John the Baptist is uncertain about whether Jesus is in fact the one awaited.

He might be wondering where the promised fire is. He's expecting judgement to fall, and yet he has someone going around healing and restoring, raising the dead, casting out demons, and it just doesn't seem to fit the bill. The first part of this chapter focuses upon Jesus' identity, and then that of John the Baptist.

The key question is, are you the one who is to come? And the important thing to notice is that Christ is judging. Christ is bringing this judgement foretold by John the Baptist, but he's doing so by showing mercy. And he responds to John the Baptist's question with allusions back to the book of Isaiah.

In Isaiah chapter 35, verse 5, we read, Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. But in the previous context, it reads, Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, Be strong, fear not.

Behold, your God will come with vengeance. With the recompense of God, he will come and save you. These things belong together.

What Christ is bringing in his healing belongs with the judgement that he's bringing, and we'll see more of that as the chapter proceeds. Jesus answers the question of John the Baptist in a way that highlights the relationship between judgement and mercy. Isaiah 61 is another passage being alluded to.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. And then, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God.

Jesus is fulfilling all these themes of restoration and healing that Isaiah foretold. But within it, he's also bringing the vengeance and the judgement that John the Baptist foretold. By sending the messengers from John the Baptist back with this report, he wants John the Baptist to see that he is fulfilling all these different parts of the

prophecies of the book of Isaiah.

And the other things are part of it. They will be understood in time as things play out. Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

The point of Jesus' statement there is that he's doing all these healings, he's restoring in many ways. And the person who can see those things and thank God for them, rather than seeing those as an obstacle, is going to be blessed on that account. I don't think we should read this primarily as a rebuke to John the Baptist.

It's a statement of blessing to those who will truly understand what's taking place. And Jesus takes this occasion, provided by the messengers from John, to discuss the ministry of John more generally. Who was John? A reed shaken by the wind? Jesus here taking up an image that we find in places such as 1 Kings 14, verse 15.

The Lord will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water and root up Israel out of this good land. A reed shaken by the wind is something or someone who is weak, easily moved or pressured or swayed this way or that by people around it. John the Baptist was not that.

He was not that sort of person at all. Was he a man dressed in soft clothing? The sort of person that you find in king's houses? No, quite the opposite. He was dressed in the clothing that you associate with Elijah.

Camel skin and a leather belt. John the Baptist marks the transition between the age of the prophets and the age of the kingdom. And he is someone who was to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness.

And the kingdom ushers in a new period of violence, this conflict between the enemies of the kingdom, between Satan and his forces, and the work of the kingdom which is pushing forward. He was Elijah who was to come. John the Baptist and Elijah are associated in their dress, in their behaviour.

John the Baptist was foretold in Malachi, the very last verses of our Old Testament, where we read, Like the first Elijah, John the Baptist is a man associated with the wilderness. He's a forerunner of a land prophet. Elijah led up to Elisha and John the Baptist led to Jesus.

He's a man clothed in camel skin with a leather belt, similar to the way that John the Baptist is described in 2nd Kings 1, verse 8. And there are further similarities to notice. Reading the story of Elijah, we have a fierce prophet who declares a drought upon the land, who brings down fire from heaven to burn up opponents, who wins this great conflict on Mount Carmel and several other dramatic events. And then God tells him at Mount Horeb that he's supposed to appoint a successor and he's supposed to anoint two other people.

And Elisha, the son of Shabbat, of Abel Meholah, you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. Now, we're expecting this great figure who's going to bring all sorts of judgment, bring down judgment upon the people and be this fierce warrior of Yahweh. But that's not actually what we find.

When Elisha comes on the scene, he multiplies loaves. He's someone who heals people. He heals Naaman the Syrian from his leprosy.

He raises from the dead. He does all these things that we associate with Christ. And it might be surprising.

This is not what we're expecting. We're expecting this person to bring the sword and yet he brings healing. However, even in those acts of blessing, there is a judgment contained and we see the same thing in Christ.

John the Baptist and the Son of Man come in contrasting ways. And yet the people of that generation reject both for different and perhaps contradictory reasons. They do not know the times.

They do not know when it's the time to dance, when it's the time to mourn. A couple of chapters earlier, we saw an indication of this with the flute players at the death of the daughter of the ruler. Wisdom, however, is known by Hadids.

I believe this should be seen as personified wisdom. And personified wisdom that's manifested in Christ and in John the Baptist. In both cases, they come and they act properly for the times, in accordance with the times.

Jesus challenges the cities he has performed most of his works in to that point. It's a preparation for judgment. These people have received great mercy and it's in their response or their failure to respond to that mercy that their judgment is found.

And so the judgment and the fire that John the Baptist foretold is happening through the separation that occurs as a result of the response to Jesus' works and the works of his disciples. We've seen in the previous chapter that Jesus declares that as his disciples shake the dust off their feet in response to an unreceptive city, it will be worse for that city on the day of judgment than for Sodom and Gomorrah. And he continues that theme here.

Judgment through blessing and through mercy. He describes Capernaum, his home city, as the one that sought to be lifted up to heaven. This should draw our mind back to Isaiah chapter 14 verses 13 to 14 where God addresses the king of Babylon.

You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north.

I will ascend above the heights of the cloud. I will make myself like the most high, but you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. And Jesus declares the same thing of Capernaum, his hometown.

This all sets things up for Jesus' prayer to the father with which this chapter ends. The father as the Lord of heaven and earth is the one who reveals and who hides. He hides the truth from the proud who imagine themselves to be wise while revealing things to the weakest and the most humble.

All authority and all things have already been given to Christ. And he is the one who passes on all that the father has given him. And apart from him, there is no access to it, no access to the father.

He gives a promise of rest to those who accept his yoke, his teaching or his law. You can think about this in terms of the Sermon on the Mount. That's Christ's yoke, the teaching that he gives.

And those who take that upon themselves will find that it brings rest. Christ's commandments, as the apostle says, are not burdensome. This might also be a reference back to Exodus 33, verse 14, where God speaks about giving his presence and bringing them into rest.

Another background for these statements might be found in intertestamental literature concerning wisdom. For instance, in the book of Sirach, chapter 51, verses 23 to 27, we find the words, There are probably allusions in this statement back to Isaiah chapter 55, verses 1 following. The book of Sirach, taking up this biblical background, presents these words in the mouth of wisdom.

And I think Jesus is doing the same thing. He's speaking, as it were, in the persona of wisdom, presenting her invitation to the people that they should come and accept her words and find rest, the sort of words that we find in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs chapter 9, the invitation of wisdom, and Christ is presenting it.

To learn of Christ is to learn in the way of wisdom. It's to learn from one who has the deeds of wisdom that demonstrate that he knows the times. The point here is not that Christ lessens the law, detracts from its authority, or dismisses or undermines its demands.

Christ has already made it very clear in the Sermon on the Mount that this is not, in fact, the case. So how exactly is this yoke easy and burden light? It seems to me that the answer is found in the fact that the Master who places this upon us is gentle and lowly in heart. He's one who reaches out to us in divine humility.

He's the one who bears our burdens for us and with us. He's the one who is present with us in our struggles. These are not burdens that we have to bear alone.

He bears them for us and with us. And as a result, we find that the burden that we are bearing is one that has joy attached to it. The burden of persecution, the burden of suffering, the burden of obedience, are burdens that he himself has borne.

He invites us to bear them with him, to follow in his footsteps, to take up our crosses, and to walk where he has walked before us. And that burden, though it might be the heaviest burden on earth to bear, is light when borne with him. A question to consider.

This chapter reveals a lot about the relationship between grace and judgment, and the way in which rejected grace can be the means by which the most severe judgment is known. How does this fact shed light upon our relationship to judgment as members of the household of God?