

Exodus 5: “Anatomy of Oppression”

“The Pharaohs had a favorite and effective strategy to keep their slaves in bondage: Keep them fighting among themselves. The divide and conquer technique has been a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression. But when the slaves unite, the Red Seas of history open and the Egypts of history crumble.”—Martin Luther King Jr.

Notes: Notice here how work is a tool of oppression. The additional burden, imposed by the Pharaoh works to keep the people separated and away from their God. Chapter 5 narrates how the Pharaoh deftly subverts the energy of the liberation movement under Moses. We’re looking here at the art of keeping people down. Things to notice: Pharaoh attributes lower morals to Israel when they begin to ask for liberation. Further, Moses serves in the function of the murmurer here at the end of the chapter. This is the first of many instances when Moses comes under fire from his own people. One of the functions of this chapter is to set forth the conflicting claims of God and Pharaoh on Israel. God ultimately gets blamed for Israel’s oppression. Notice that Moses utilizes the word “evil” with reference to God. Deliverance from evil may entail enduring even more evil.

Discussion Questions:

1. What did Moses expect to happen in 5.23?
2. Who doesn’t speak here? What does the people’s silence suggest?
3. How does the language in this chapter compare with 1.13-14? It appears that Israel is stuck in service to something. Whom shall it be? Can you think of comparisons to our own situation?
4. How might Pharaoh be responsible for the later murmuring tradition where the people would look back on Egypt and think that they never had it better?
5. How might the commandment about the Sabbath Day be seen as liberating? Oppressive?
6. Can you think of any oppressive systems which utilize confusion, where the real source of oppression lays the blame on others?