

EXODUS

THE NIV
APPLICATION
COMMENTARY

From biblical text . . . to contemporary life

PETER ENNS



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Israelites have gone through that a speedy, painless, undelayed departure would be in order (especially since God himself ordered the departure to be hasty [12:11]). But God is not finished with the Egyptians yet. He devises what by common military standards is a foolish strategy: March the Israelites toward the sea, leaving them no escape route. Then entice Pharaoh to follow the Israelites so he and Pharaoh can engage in one final battle, one that will show Pharaoh who is truly God.

In fact, to make sure that this strategy will work, God does what he has done several times before during the plagues: He hardens Pharaoh's heart (14:4). Everything Pharaoh does—his previous decisions to let the Israelites go, the hardening of his heart not to let them go, his final decision to let them go, the retracting of that decision we see here, and finally the death of the Egyptian army in the sea—it is all in God's hands. God does not so much predict Pharaoh's move as force the move himself. Like a master chess player, God induces Pharaoh to move his king into checkmate, and he doesn't even realize it.

The paradox of God's plan to harden Pharaoh's heart and of the latter's decision to pursue begins in 14:5. Pharaoh regrets having let his slaves go. His concern should remind us of his predecessor's initial response to the growing numbers of Israelites: He enslaves them (1:11). This strategy appears to have been a boon for Pharaoh, and he is understandably reluctant to let them go. What is intriguing in this passage, however, is the dialogue that precedes Pharaoh's pursuit. Why does he need to be told (v. 5) that the Israelites have left? Had he not given the order himself? Is this news to him, or does the report merely jar him into realizing what is happening? Moreover, why does the realization that releasing the Israelites means losing his slaves come as such a surprise to him? "What have we done?" he responds in verse 5.

The likely answer to both of these issues is that Pharaoh apparently expects the Israelites to go only on a three-day journey, which is what Moses asked for from the beginning and which Pharaoh probably means in 12:31 when he finally gives the command to go. Although the text does not spell this out, it is reasonable to conclude that after three days have elapsed, Pharaoh is told that "the people . . . fled" (v. 5), meaning that they have kept right on going.⁶ The three days are up, and it finally dawns on Pharaoh what is happening. If this is the proper understanding of the scenario, the purpose of proposing to Pharaoh a three-day journey from the outset becomes clear. It was never God's intention to take the Israelites on a three-day journey anywhere, even though this is what Moses is commanded to tell Pharaoh. The purpose of this ruse, however, is to entice Egypt to follow the Israelites,

6. On this view, see Sarna, *Exodus*, 71.

thus resulting in their death in the sea and allowing Egypt's punishment to come full circle: They are drowned in the sea for drowning the Israelite children in the Nile.

The thought that the Israelites will not come back is too much for Pharaoh, so he chases them. He musters all his power. He calls the best and brightest of Egypt's troops (v. 7). The irony, of course, is that Pharaoh has gone to fight Israel's God, the God of the plagues, with mere chariots, horse-men, and troops (v. 9). These may be the best of the best, but they will prove of no avail. Whatever dissension in the ranks there may have been earlier (e.g., 10:7) is now gone. They *all* pursue (14:9). God's punishment, like the tenth plague, makes no distinction among the Egyptians. They will all get what is coming to them. They arrive near Pi Hahiroth along the route the Israelites have taken. Things are proceeding according to God's design.

But this turn of events comes as a great shock to the Israelites. It is clear to the reader that Pharaoh's pursuit will end badly for him, but Israel is not made privy to God's purpose for taking the long way out of Egypt.⁷ The Israelites, contrary to God's plan, are expecting a carefree jaunt out of Egypt. The last thing they expect is to pause for a moment at the sea, and then turn around and see the Egyptians in hot pursuit, camped within easy striking distance. So, in one sense one can hardly blame the Israelites for reacting the way they do in verses 10–14: "They were terrified and cried out to the LORD" (v. 10).

Still, their moment of panic is not painted by the author in a sympathetic light. There is, for one thing, a significance attached to the use of the word "cry out." This is the same word we have seen before (*sa'aq*), first in 3:6. The story of the Exodus is proof to the Israelites that God *has* heard their cry. The sudden reiteration of that cry, so soon after they have witnessed God's mighty acts in the plagues, is nothing less than capitulation to the appearance of their immediate circumstances, of which the events of the previous thirteen chapters should have cured them. This quick, almost embarrassing mood change by the Israelites is the first installment of the grumbling theme, hinted at as early as 2:11–14, that will characterize much of Israel's behavior throughout the desert period to follow, and to which we will have ample opportunity to return.

The people's specific outcry is also startling. Apparently they were quite happy as slaves in Egypt, and their blindness to God's might leads them to think of only two options: slavery in Egypt or death in the desert (v. 12). This

7. The NIV translation of 13:17 implies that God *spoke*, i.e., announced, his plan to take the long way out of Egypt, but this is based on an overly literal translation of the Hebrew verb *'amar*, which often means "to think," i.e., to say to oneself. The text itself does not indicate in any way that God announced his plan openly, or even that he told Moses privately.

hyperbolic response is more of a temper tantrum than a cry for help. At the first sight of trouble, they are willing to march straight back to Egypt, ignoring the mighty acts of God that have brought them out in the first place. With Pharaoh in hot pursuit, they do not give a second thought to the promise God made to the patriarchs. They still have not learned that God's purpose for bringing them out of Egypt is not simply to save *them*, but to maintain his covenant tie to *all* his people, past, present, and future. They have still not learned that *their* circumstances are not the final standard on which to view the work of God.

The precise wording of the outcry in verse 12 is not found anywhere in the preceding narrative. It is possible that this specific complaint was made earlier but simply not recorded (perhaps hinted at in 5:21). But why would this be the case? Whether or not the complaint itself was actually made, the fact that it was not previously recorded adds to the startling effect this response has on the reader. Moses is blindsided.

It is in this context of the Israelites' faithlessness in light of what God has done that we should understand verse 14: "The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." This is not, as is suggested by a number of translations (including the NIV) and commentaries, a word of comfort.⁸ Moses is not saying, "There, there. Don't worry. God will take care of you. You'll see. Be calm." Rather, this is a terse, impatient command on Moses' part. In Hebrew, the last part of the verse is a mere two Hebrew words, which are best translated as "You be quiet!" or better, "Shut up!"⁹ This is no word of comfort but an angry denouncement of Israel's paper-thin faith.

One's thoughts turn immediately to a similar episode in Numbers 20:9–11, where, in response to Israelite murmuring about lack of water, Moses becomes extremely angry and strikes the rock instead of speaking to it. Exodus 14:10–14 is the first such episode where Israel's lack of faith brings upon them Moses' anger. This lack of trust in light of the plague narrative is startling, and perhaps it is meant to be. It is a harbinger of things to come.

Verse 15 is one of the oddest twists in Exodus and has been a topic of discussion by interpreters since before the time of Christ. Why is it, after the *Israelites* cry out in verse 14 and Moses rebukes *them* for their lack of faith, that *Moses* is reprimanded by God for crying out? Some commentators suggest

8. See Sarna, *Exodus*, 72: Moses "calms them and assuages their fear."

9. Perhaps the closest biblical parallel to 14:14 is 2 Kings 18:36, where the same Hebrew root (*hṣ*) is used. The Israelites did not respond to the threats of Sennacherib's commander: "The people *kept silent*; they did not answer him, because the king had commanded, 'Do not answer him'" (pers. trans.). Here, as we see in Ex. 14:14, *hṣ* is used to describe the people's silence in response to their leader's command to be quiet. See also Gen. 24:21; 1 Sam. 10:27; Jer. 38:27. This root consistently denotes the absence of speech rather than peaceful calmness.