

“And Pharaoh said: Behold, the people of the land now are many” (Exod. 5:5)¹

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Exod. 5: 5 reads as follows: “*wyy ʾmr pr ʿh hn-rbbym ʿth ʿm h ʾs whšbttm ʾm mssbltm*” (“And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens”)². The interpretations given to this verse are not satisfactory and do not make sense. The problem is what does Pharaoh mean by telling Moses and Aaron that “the people of the land are now many”³? What difference does the number of his workers make to his hearers, and how is this answer connected to the rest of the sentence: “and you make them rest from their burdens”? Some commentators accept the Samaritan version, which reads here *m ʿm* (adding *m*: “of the people”) instead of: “*ʿm*” (“people”) and thus means that the number of the Israelites is greater than the number of the Egyptians.⁴ By adding “of”, the Samaritan version connects this verse the notion of Pharaoh’s fear in Ex. 1:9⁵ and thus tells Moses and Aaron that the Israelites are already more numerous than the Egyptians. Relieving the Israelites of their burden may increase their number. There are two difficulties with this explanation: One is, that only the Samaritan version emends the text and it does not have the support of any other version. The second – it is not reasonable to suppose that the number of the Israelites is greater than the Egyptians. Another explanation of the clause is simple, if we read it as: “The people of the land are many and you would stop them working”⁶, but this explanation leaves us,

¹ I wish to thank prof. Nachum Rosel for reading the paper and express his opinion about it. However, all responsibility for the content rests with me. S. B.

² RSV translation.

³ It appears as if Pharaoh hints here to the fact given in Ex. i 9 about the multiplication of the ‘people of Israel’: ‘And he said to his people, Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us’.

⁴ See: BHS 92; NEB 64; Noth, Exodus 52; Childs, Exodus 91. The Septuagint reflects the MT wording.

⁵ See above, n. 2.

⁶ Rashi: since they (the people) have a lot of work to do, the interruption of Moses and Aaron prevent them of work, and so it is a great loss for Pharaoh. So: Chacham, Shemoth 76 (Heb). Another interpretation is giving the phrase as a question: ‘Now that the Israelite are many would you stop them of their work?’ See: Pixley, Exodus 61. Again, we do not get an answer to the problem of what the connection is between the number of the people of the land to the previous

however, with the same problem: How does this answer help us to understand the clause? What does Pharaoh mean by mentioning the number of the “people of the land”?

Saying that the “people of the land” are a ‘horde’ is another attempt to explain the first part of the clause.⁷ It may explain the meaning of the expression: “The people of the land”, but not the reason for mentioning the number of the Israelites.

It appears that we have to look for the interpretation of this obscure clause by studying the whole context. Reading v.3a we see a strange expression of Moses and Aaron: “... lest he fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword”. God, however, while talking to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:18) did not utter these threats. The only instructing there was that the Israelite should ask permission to go to the desert to make sacrifices to their god. God did not express the threat of death by disease or by war, but Moses and Aaron added it. The question is what made them add this notion? Why should Pharaoh mind if some other nation suffers losses and how was this threat supposed to convince him to let Israel go to carry out their rites? The answer may be that Moses and Aaron thought that if Pharaoh heard that the number of his slave workers might decrease, he might let them go for the three days' celebration in order to prevent losing them. I suggest that the clause: “The people of the land are now many” in Exod. 5:5, refers to the threat of losing his workers. Pharaoh's reaction is that he does not mind losing workers, since he has many of them. Propp, in his book Exodus 1-18, refers to the problem, but does not give sufficient details.⁸ This interpretation raises two problems: (a) what is the meaning of “The people of the land”? And (b) If the statement: “The people of the land are now many”, is a reaction to the warning in v 3, how does it happen to be found in verse 5 and not in the following verse, no. 4? For problem (a) we suggest accepting Durham's interpretation, that by the expression “the people of the land” Pharaoh means the Israelites.⁹ But even if we do not accept this interpretation, we may still understand the expression as if Pharaoh has said that he has enough people of his own, so that he is not afraid of having the number of his slaves reduced. The problem of the gap between the location of the warning and the statement of Pharaoh (v.3 and 5) is more serious.

verse, and what does Pharaoh mean by mentioning the number of the ‘people of the land’?

⁷ Durham, Genesis 62.

⁸ See, Propp, Exodus 253, starts: “lest he strikes us”. The author explains the clause, as “If Israel would suffer for failing to worship God ... how much more might Pharaoh suffer!”

⁹ See note 6.

It seems as if Pharaoh is furious. The author wanted to show that Pharaoh does not speak in a regular order. Pharaoh repeats his idea that Moses and Aaron are disturbing the people in their work (in v.4 and 5). So he says two things. One is a reaction to the warning, that the god of the Israelites has warned his people of the punishment for not worshipping him properly; and the other is that Moses and Aaron are disturbing the people in their work. The fact that v.4 and 5 both start with the word *wyyʕmr* (“and he said”) strengthens this interpretation, since it is known that when *wyyʕmr* comes twice in two consecutive sentences, it means that in the second case the same speaker wishes to begin another idea.¹⁰ Thus, in v.4, in the first *wyyʕmr*, Pharaoh reacts to the actual mission of Moses and Aaron. He only reproaches them for disturbing the people of their labor (“Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work?”). Only in the second *wyyʕmr*, in v.5, does he counter the request of Moses and Aaron in v.3 (“Let us go ...“... lest he fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword”). Only there does he actually relate directly to the danger of God smiting his Israelites workforce. What Pharaoh means is: I do not mind if you lose people, since I have many other “people of the land” to do the work.¹¹ We are still left with the problem of the connection between the clause: “and make them rest from their burdens” and the previous clause: “And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land are now many”. I suggest we understand it as if it were part of verse 4, and read the whole verse as follows: “But the king of Egypt said to them, Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? [and you make them rest of their burden] get to your burdens”. The reason that this clause appears in v.5 is because the author wished to depict Pharaoh’s anger at Moses’ impudence in asking for a three-day holiday. I do not suggest emending the text, but rather understanding it as if v.5a were read into v.4, i. e. transposed into verse 4 after the

¹⁰ Shiloach, ויאמר ... ויאמר, 251 (Heb.).

¹¹ There is another explanation for the two *wyyʕmr*. Noth, Exodus 52, suggests that the first *wyyʕmr*. in v.4, belongs to E document, using the title *mlk mšrym* (king of Egypt) and the one in v.5 comes from J document, using the title ‘Pharaoh’. The editor of the pericope joined the verses of the two documents and thus we have received a duplication of *wyyʕmr*. (Above, n. 3). The problem is that this reconstruction does not explain what Pharaoh means by saying: ‘the people of the land now are many’. On the other hand, using *wyyʕmr*. twice in two following sentences is quite common in the HB (e.g. Gen; 15:2-3; 30:27-28; 42:1-2 etc. Shiloach collected about 106 cases of *wyyʕmr* ... *wyyʕmr* ... using different titles for the same person (i. e. “Pharaoh” and “the king of Egypt”) may be explained on stylistic grounds.

words: “Moses and Aaron why do you take the people away of their burdens” in v.4.¹²

Summary

It is suggested to interpret Exod. 5:5a as if Pharaoh means that he has many people for his work, so he does not mind if the Israelites lose people.

Zusammenfassung

Es wird vorgeschlagen, Ex 5,5a so zu interpretieren, dass der Pharao meint, er habe so viele Menschen für seine Arbeit, sodass es ihm nichts ausmacht, wenn er das Volk der Israeliten verliere.

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¹² It is a well-known method of interpretation of the medieval commentators such as Rashi and Ramban. For Rashi, see Gen. 11:15. For Ramban Gen. 15:13. See also: Rendsburg, *Language Article 6* (<http://www.ihsonline.org> Rendsburg lists several occurrences in which the author of the narrative confused the words order deliberately in order to give the reader a tangible feeling of the object. In my opinion, the passage: Exod. 5-4 belongs to the same category.