

On Tenacious Parenting

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“We will go out with our young and our old; we will go out with our sons and our daughters....”

Exodus 10:9

We have never been able to determine the historical identity of Pharaoh in the Exodus story. He might have been Thutmose or Ramses. Or he might have been Seti. The Bible has no interest in his identity and does not bother with the question. And the reason for such a lack of interest is that when we have seen one Pharaoh, we have seen all Pharaohs. They all look alike and act alike. Said another way, over the long course of theo-economic history, many different persons are cast as Pharaoh and take on his persona. Thus in reading the Exodus story, we do well to ask, “Where is Pharaoh showing up?”

I.

As portrayed in the Bible, Pharaoh is an agent of *greedy productivity*. He cannot have enough, enough of wealth, enough of power and control, enough of self-aggrandizement. His passion is always for more, in his case, *more* bricks in order to build *more* granaries in order to store *more* grain. Grain in the ancient world was a mark of power and wealth because everyone has to eat. James C. Scott, in *Against the Grain*, has shown that a monopoly of grain was the basis of the earliest empires of the Near East. Pharaoh’s greed for more was ruthless and unending. He commanded his slaves:

Get to our labors (Exodus 5:4).

Let heavier work be laid on them (v. 9).

Complete your work (v. 13).

You are lazy (v. 17).

You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks (v. 19).

Pharaoh will not be satiated!

Concerning the prophetic imagination of Ezekiel, Pharaoh must boast about his wealth, even to claim that he is a self-starter. The Nile River is in fact the source of his wealth, but in his self-deception, he can imagine he invented the Nile: “My Nile is my own; I made it for myself” (Ezekiel 29:3).

He overestimates his power and prowess and consequently becomes a polluter:

You consider yourself a lion among the nations,
but you are like a dragon in the seas;
you thresh about in your streams,
trouble the waters with your feet,
and foul your streams (Ezekiel 32:2).

II.

Pharaoh's proud success characteristically depended on cheap labor that was reduced to a tradable commodity. Such a supply of cheap labor, in his case as in the case of US wealth, is slavery. But it could alternatively be low wages that keep workers dependent, in debt, and devastated into despair. It is no wonder that Pharaoh's Israelite slaves "groaned under their slavery and cried out" (Exodus 2:23). Such cries of course did not matter to Pharaoh. He was interested only in the bottom line of production. As bricks became more valuable and more required, the production quota could readily increase because slaves are allowed no bargaining power.

For good reason Pharaoh feared the loss of his supply of cheap labor, even as slave owners in our Old South feared slave rebellion and passed laws for the return of escaped slaves. Thus the story of the Exodus turns on tension between *the intent of the Israelite slaves* to depart Pharaoh's Egypt and *the ruthless resolve of Pharaoh* to prevent such escape. Pharaoh's fear of such an escape led to his irrational policy of violence: "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women...if it is a boy, kill him" (Exodus 16). He was prepared to kill the children in order to retain his labor force! The outcome of his policy was to pollute the Nile, the very source of his life and property: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile" (Exodus 1:22). Like every Pharaoh this one reduced vulnerable people, when necessary, to a readily dispensable commodity.

III.

As the story goes, the long arc of history governed by YHWH is against Pharaoh. He slowly came to recognize that his absolutist policy of violence was unsustainable. As a result, he entered into calculating negotiations with Moses in order to concede as little as possible. His ruthlessness is matched by his unblinking cunning. The narrative identifies three ploys of negotiation by Pharaoh.

First, Pharaoh will permit the slaves to worship "your God" (the God of emancipation), but worship must be in his land and so kept under close surveillance (Exodus 8:23). Moses must of course refuse the offer because worship of YHWH cannot take place under Pharaoh's supervision.

Second, Pharaoh will allow the Israelite slaves to go and worship YHWH, but then adds an unexpected question that toys with the slaves: "But which ones are to go?" (10:8). Pharaoh intends to hold back some as hostages. Moses resists with a statement of uncompromising resolve, refusing to leave anyone behind (10:9). He refuses to bargain anyone away, not "our young or our old, our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds." Pharaoh responds that he will never let "your little ones" go. The conflict concerns the protection of the children of the Hebrew slaves, a protection linked to YHWH and inimical to Pharaoh's cunning ruthlessness. Committed as he is to brutal transactional processes, Pharaoh can never appreciate such non-negotiable human solidarity, particularly as it pertains to vulnerable children.

Third, Pharaoh further conceded that even the children can go, and only "flocks and herds" (their wealth!) will be kept hostage (10:24). This is yet another bargaining ploy that Moses must refuse. In each of these proposals, Pharaoh reluctantly concedes more and more.

Our interest here concerns the second ploy of Pharaoh concerning the children

of the slaves. Moses is totally committed to the children; no doubt the slave mothers and fathers were adamant in their protection of their children. Moses in effect declares to Pharaoh, “We won’t go until we all go.” In Exodus 10:26 Moses avers that not a hoof of an animal will be abandoned to Pharaoh, much less our children. So the issue is joined. Will the children of the vulnerable be separated from their parents as pawns in a rapacious policy of greed? Or will passionate solidarity prevail against the separation policy of Pharaoh?

IV.

Pharaoh never “was” but always “is.” It takes no imagination, in our context, to see that this narrative pertains to our contemporary Pharonic policies that treat the vulnerable as disposable and that regard a cheap labor force as a dispensable commodity. It takes no imagination to see that a lustful passion for wealth, control, and security draws toward irrationality that in the end will be self-destructive. Of course the parents of the separated immigrant children among us do not imagine that they are reiterating this old drama. And those parents back in Egypt for whom Moses spoke did not understand that they were sketching a paradigm for our later use. Both sets of parents, then and now, simply acted out parental solidarity that cannot be defeated by the ruthless cunning of Pharaoh. It is an old tale now being reiterated before our eyes. Now as always, a deathly outcome of such insanity for such Pharonic power is certain.

Before our very eyes now acted out is lethal, self-destructiveness with which the fear and greed of Pharaoh never reckoned. We are watching tenacious parenting that evokes important engaged allies. Pharaoh did not know, then or now, that this pathos-filled drama of fear and greed collides with the will and purpose of the God who cherishes, champions, and sides with every child, no matter how vulnerable. When we do such faithful imaginative reading, we may wonder where the Bible-thumpers are who are so enthralled by fear and greed that they miss the drama before our very eyes.

V.

The God of all children is presented in scripture as one with tenacious parenting instincts. Of course there is the waiting, welcoming father of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). Long before that, however, Israel (this company of slaves) is marked as God’s own son, the first born (Exodus 4:22), to whose emancipated wellbeing God is committed.

Amid the crisis of exile when Israel as God’s beloved child was under threat, this tenacious divine parent is “all in” for the child:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called my son....
How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim (Hosea 11:1, 8)?
Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he the child in whom I delight?

As often as I speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore I am deeply moved for him;
I will surely have mercy on him, says the Lord (Jeremiah 31:20).
Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
Yet I will not forget you (Isaiah 49:15).

Tenacious parenting at our border replicates God's deepest tenacity that bends the arc of history toward vulnerable beloved children.

The God of vulnerable children long before anticipated the resolve of Sir Lancelot in *Camelot*:

If ever I would leave you, it wouldn't be in summer...
But if I'd leave you, it wouldn't be in autumn...
And could I leave you running merrily through the snow...
If ever I would leave you, how could it be in springtime...
Oh no, not in springtime, summer, winter, or fall
No never could I leave you at all.

YHWH sang that song early on for the slaves; and now parents at the border, echoing the Lord of all borders, sing it about their children. And we join them in active resolve. "No never!"