

Exodus 14:5-7

Verse 5: *Then it was reported to the King of Egypt that the people had fled and Pharaoh and his servants had a change of attitude against the people and they said "What in the world have we done in releasing Israel from our service?"*

Then it was reported: The report is most likely delivered by a reconnaissance group empowered by Pharaoh to track the progress of the Israelites. Such "spies" were an integral part of ancient (as well as modern) armies (cf. Num.13; Josh.2). Jamieson comments:

(At) Etham, which was on the edge of the wilderness, the King's spies, who doubtless were employed to watch the movements of the Israelites would expect them to engage in their intended solemnity. But observing that instead of halting to make preparations for the sacred rites they took this road, a suspicion that their secret purpose was flight was now confirmed.¹

that the people had fled: This does not refer to the Israelite departure from their dwellings, as Bush points out:

Pharaoh could not be ignorant that the Israelites had left Egypt for the avowed purpose of holding a sacrifice in the desert, as they had gone out with his permission, and their departure had been hastened by his own people. But this he seems not to have regarded as a "flight." He is now informed, however, that they had "fled;" i.e., that they discovered a very different intention from that of going three days' journey into the wilderness and returning again as he had been led to expect.²

However, the report given to Pharaoh, was not entirely correct. According to Ex. 8:25-28, Pharaoh had given permission for a three days' journey into the desert. Actually, the Israelites have not set foot into it as yet, having been ordered by the Lord to turn aside and march northeast, and so are still technically within the parameters of Pharaoh's order. What prompted the false report is not entirely clear, but it is most likely that the watchers interpreted the preparations of the Israelites to move out from Etham as a clear indication that they were about to leave "the land" and enter "the desert". Actually, this would be the only logical thing to conclude as they saw the great camp packing up. In the interests of speed, a paramount consideration under the circumstances, a report was no doubt sent out to Pharaoh immediately before the exact

¹R. Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and D. Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids 1945) in. loc.

²G. Bush, *Notes Critical and Practical on the Book of Exodus* (Minneapolis n.d.)171.

direction of march was discerned. According to this interpretation, the meaning of “fled” in this context is essentially the same as “had left the land” (that is, had entered the desert). Once again, Pharaoh had no legitimate grounds for complaint about this as we saw above. But the report nevertheless provoked him and his advisers who apparently assumed that if the Israelites ever did once brave the desert that they would be gone forever. This was indeed how things actually turned out so their reasoning was in one sense sound. However, it was not the Israelites and Moses who violated the Exodus chapter eight agreement, but rather the Egyptians and Pharaoh. This point is important since it released Israel from any sort of obligation to return to Egypt (no matter how specious) and cleared Moses and the Lord of even the shadow of a charge of deceit in requesting merely the aforementioned three days’ journey only to depart entirely.

Pharaoh and his servants had a change of attitude against the people: The Hebrew verb here, *haphech*, expresses an alteration of thinking, or change in attitude by Pharaoh and his advisers vis-a-vis the Israelites. This is not a hardening of the understanding (that is, of the heart or *lebh*) per se such as the one which will occur in verse eight. The meaning is not that their underlying hostile attitude toward Israel has been replaced. Rather, the change involved is one from a surly resignation to the supposedly temporary departure of the Israelites to one of chagrin and alarm at the realization that their loss will be permanent. Pharaoh and his advisers now fear that by granting the necessary concessions (in Ex. 12:32) they now stand to lose their vassals entirely.

Verse 6: *Then he had his chariot harnessed while he took along his personal staff with him.*

Pharaoh has been thoroughly provoked and begins making preparations for a punitive military expedition. Note, however, that none of the initial steps he takes towards this end is irrevocable. Pharaoh’s preparations act to ease the frustration he feels about the situation. Despite his great power, things have once again tumbled out of his control. As he reacted with harsh measures in his conflict with Moses and the Israelites earlier in the book, only to be thwarted by the mighty hand of God, here again he cannot seem to help himself from reacting in a high-handed manner. But the lessons of the ten plagues are impossible for even this most arrogant of kings to soon forget, and it will require further hardening (i.e., God allowing him the mental room to ignore the otherwise paralyzing truth; see commentary on verse four above) before he actually initiates the pursuit (this happens in verse eight).

his personal staff: His personal staff or retainers. Pharaoh takes this staff along with him to help him with the selection, in the next verse, of the armed force which he is mustering. The staff most likely includes some of the same individuals referred to as his advisers in verse five. In any case, the context of verse seven makes it clear that Pharaoh has confidence in the military judgment of these men.

The Hebrew word ‘*am*, which I am translating “staff” here, does not mean “army” in this context (as some translations have it, though ‘*am* often does mean “army”). Pharaoh’s select pursuing

force is consistently referred to in this chapter as “his force” (*cheylo*), not, literally, “his army” (*‘am*). Translating *‘am* here as “army” ignores the fact that the term in a military context usually means a complete organization (see 1Ki.20:10; 1Sam.11:11), not an elite force selected out of the whole (as indicated by the process in verse seven). With a rapid pursuit in mind, Pharaoh might well wish to be selective, leaving the more numerous infantry elements of his armed forces behind, whose much slower speed would render rapid pursuit of the Israelite host impossible (see below).³

Verse 7: *And he chose six hundred select chariots, all the Egyptian cavalry, and officers for the entire force.*

In this verse we get the details of Pharaoh’s organization of the force he will use later to pursue the Israelites. The battle group consists of two main components, chariots and cavalry. In addition, a special chain of command is selected for the operation. Pharaoh’s purpose choosing as he does is twofold: speed and loyalty. First, the force described in verse seven will have been a very swift one. Cavalry was the fastest branch of his army, with the chariots a close second. Note that he selects even these from the whole, and we may infer then that only the finest of the chariots were taken, most likely to avoid time-consuming breakdowns. Secondly, the force will have been a loyal one. He takes only “Egyptian” cavalry; none of the foreign levies which so often accompanied the imperial armies of antiquity are included in this elite force (and we may assume that the selection criteria for the charioteers included dependability as a major factor as well). For insurance, a specially picked officer corps is set over the entire force, also picked, no doubt, for loyalty as well as for their ability.

Speed was obviously a necessary criterion for this elite force in order to be able to close with the Israelites before they got beyond his grasp (at this point in the narrative, it will be recalled, Pharaoh was still under the impression that they have “fled” into the desert; see verse five above). Loyalty was also an essential characteristic because only the most stalwart and devoted could be expected to follow such orders and pursue the Israelites in the wake of the devastating plagues they have seen their country endure at the Lord’s hands for less overt acts against them (see Ex. 12:33).

select chariots, all the Egyptian cavalry: The major crux in the interpretation of verse seven is the use of the Hebrew word *rechebh* here, which occurs twice in the verse and is translated both as “chariots” and “cavalry”. That Pharaoh’s hand-picked force consisted of both these elements

³ The fact that the clause *while he took along his personal staff with him* is a disjunctive clause in Hebrew, occurring simultaneously with the readying of Pharaoh’s chariot (hence the translation *while*), is another indication that only his staff is meant: a large military force requires significantly more time to prepare for action than a single chariot.

is beyond doubt.⁴ Many interpreters have taken the word *rechebh* to have the same meaning in both parts of the verse. However, such a view creates a major disparity in meaning between the two phrases, for then the former use would clearly be referring to a limited, select group (as indicated by the Hebrew word *bachur*, “chosen”), while the latter would have to include *all* the Egyptian chariots. That the writer (Moses, in the traditional view) had no difficulty using the word *rechebh* in different ways in quick succession can be seen from his use of the word above in verse six to refer to only a single chariot, while here in verse seven the same word, unchanged in form, refers to a group of six hundred chariots.⁵ The best solution is that the *rechebh* as used above, the second use here in verse seven refers not to the chariot force previously mentioned, but to the cavalry force (i.e., men mounted directly on horseback) which was the second main component of Pharaoh's battle group.

1. Although many commentators have argued against such an interpretation on the grounds that there was no Egyptian cavalry force at this early time, this is primarily an argument from silence which, being inherently weak in any case, collapses upon examination of further evidence. For as Rawlinson points out:

(The) evidence of historical writers is directly opposed to this conclusion. Diodorus Siculus assigns to Sesostris a cavalry force of 24,000. Herodotus represents Amasis as leading his army on horseback. In the historical books of the Old Testament, the Egyptian horsemen obtain frequent mention; and as many as 60,000 are said to have accompanied Sheshonk (Shishak) when he invaded Palestine. The hieroglyphic texts, moreover, if translated aright, make frequent mention of Egyptian cavalry; and the “command of the cavalry” was a very honorable and important post, generally held by one of the King's sons.⁶

2. Other biblical evidence also shows that the Egyptians possessed cavalry forces. For the period after the Exodus, we have 2Kng.18:24 and Is.36:9. For the period before the Exodus, Gen.50:9. The latter passage makes a clear statement on the subject: “There also went up with him (Joseph on his way to Canaan to bury Jacob accompanied by an Egyptian contingent) *both chariots and horsemen*; and it was a very great company.”

3. Ex. 15:1 states that the Lord cast into the Red Sea the “horse and its rider”, a direct reference to the cavalry contingent, inappropriate for chariot forces.

⁴ The dual composition of the force is substantiated in the following passages: Ex.14:9, 17, 18, 21, 26, 28.

⁵ *rechebh* can be a collective noun in Hebrew, just as fish in English can refer to one fish or many. However, it did have a plural form, as in the phrase *richbey par'oh*, “chariots of Pharaoh S.S.1:9.

⁶ George Rawlinson, *History of Ancient Egypt* (New York 1866) v.1, 214.

4. “Horsemen” are constantly mentioned throughout the rest of chapter fourteen as distinct from the chariot contingent (verses 9, 17, 18, 23, 26 and 28).

5. The word *rechebh* is indeed used of a cavalry force at Is. 21:7 and 9.

6. The use of the word *mitsrayim* (“Egyptians”) in connection with the second use of *rechebh* is also revealing. It would be most odd indeed to apply the adjective “Egyptian” to the chariot force since this would have been redundant in the extreme. However, we do know that the Libyans and Ethiopians furnished cavalry auxiliaries to Egypt.⁷

Since the use of the horse in warfare was widespread in the ancient Near East and required relatively less technological skill than the building and employment of chariots, it would seem the best solution for our context to conclude that the text is distinguishing purely Egyptian cavalry from the foreign levies of that same arm with the second use of the word *rechebh*.

and officers for the entire force: The Hebrew word *shalish* is the one used here to designate the special officer cadre selected by Pharaoh for this mission. Driver comments:

The Heb. shalish . . . denotes apparently some superior kind of military officer: it is used of a military attendant of the king, --- or, in the plural, of a body of such attendants, --- such as we might call, for distinction, a knight. From the resemblance of the word to the Heb. for “three” it has often been supposed to denote the “third” man in a chariot, i.e., the shield bearer (by the side of the driver and the bowman). But as appears from pictorial representations, the Egyptian war chariot was manned, except in triumphal processions by only two occupants, the driver and the bowman.⁸

⁷ G. Maspero, *History of Egypt* (London n.d.) v.4, 320.

⁸ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge 1918) 116.