

Clogging the Wheels of Empire

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Exodus 14:19-31, Exodus 15:1b-11, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

Pharaoh was enraged. Here he was, the greatest ruler on the face of the earth. He was everybody's favourite Pharaoh – his advisors told him that all the time.

And yes, it was true that the media were putting out polls that said that regular Egyptians were turning against him, that he was the least popular Pharaoh in history, but that was all obviously all fake news.

People were just upset by all of the recent plagues. Frogs and locusts, boils and hail have a way of souring everybody's mood. But nobody should blame Pharaoh for any of that. As he had told them, all of that was the fault of his predecessors who had neglected the monuments of Egypt for so long, or something like that.

Troublesome Hebrews

Besides, he had been busy with the foolish demands of the Hebrews who were asking for permission to travel into the desert for three days to have some festival for their God.

He kept reminding the slaves that they were being ungrateful. After all, they had been treating Egypt so unfairly for generations – sitting by pots of meat and eating their fill of bread without even paying for any of it!

So, after one of the latest plagues, he told them he had had enough and he was cutting them off. He didn't need anything that they produced, and Egypt would be better off without them.

Negotiation Tactic

It was, of course, a negotiating tactic – the art of the deal. He expected them to cave and offer to do even more labour for smaller rations of bread and meat.

But then they went and walked away from the negotiating table. Actually, they walked away from the country altogether! They went into the desert and, over three days later, there was no sign of them returning.

It was quickly becoming clear to everybody that Egypt did need them. In fact, the slaves were vital to Egypt's ongoing prosperity. They supplied everything from energy to food.

So Pharaoh summoned his chariots, the most advanced fighting force on the face of the earth, and headed out after them. The army easily found their trail and followed it to the shores of the Red Sea.

That was a sore point too. Hadn't Pharaoh himself decreed just the other week that the body of water should henceforth be called the Sea of Egypt! And yet people defiantly continued to call it what it had been called for centuries.

The Night Before

And there, by the shores of the Sea of Reeds – I mean, the Sea of Egypt – they finally caught up with them. The Hebrews looked so pathetic, huddled up against the shores of the sea. It was late in the day when they found them, and the



weather was odd. An unusual wind was blowing strongly and steadily out of the East and between the Egyptian chariots and the fleeing Hebrews was a strange and disorienting cloud. So Pharaoh decided to stand down his troops and let them rest until morning.

Attack!

As the morning sun rose behind the wind that still blew out of the East, the cloud finally dissipated. Pharaoh looked up and saw that the Hebrews were actually trying to flee across the seabed where the waters had retreated before the wind. What fools! The soggy ground would only slow them down. His charioteers would sweep them away.

Pharaoh shouted for the cavalry to attack. He laughed aloud as his team took off at a gallop. This was going to be so easy; it would almost be fun. But, just as he thought that, he noticed that there was something wrong with his chariot. The muck of the sea bottom was clogging the wheels so that they turned with difficulty.

Egypt as Symbol of Empire

Throughout the Bible, Egypt and its various rulers seem to stand in for the worst examples of empire. Even when the biblical authors are actually concerned with the evils of empires such as Babylon, Persia or Alexander of Macedon, they tell stories of Egypt and how bad Pharaoh was. These stories help them to understand the actions and motivations of these other powerful empires.

And it seems to me that we might need to draw on some of that wisdom today. Like it or not, we seem to be living in a moment in time that is all about authoritarian leaders trying to build empires.

Rise of Authoritarians

I am not picking on any particular authoritarian here. Everywhere you look these days, you seem to see strongmen who are trying to seize land to build up their empires.

It could be President Xi in China putting down protests in Tibet while planning an invasion of Taiwan. It could be Vladimir Putin seeking to rebuild the old Russian Empire by invading Ukraine or Benjamin Netanyahu bombing and seeking to seize territory in Lebanon and Gaza.

And of course, there is another guy who has already taken control of the country of Venezuela and has set his sights on such far-flung bits of geography as Cuba, Greenland and the Strait of Hormuz. He also won't stop talking about making Alberta or perhaps the whole of Canada into his 51st state.

The Lure of Empire

And I realize that your automatic response to some or all of these empire builders is to reject them, maybe even hate them. But let's stop for a moment and try to understand why we are seeing so much of this kind of activity today.

We are living in uncertain times. Things are changing at a disorienting pace and in some disturbing directions. Artificial Intelligence is upsetting, maybe even destroying, the labour market. Huge technology companies are taking control of every aspect of our lives and all of our information. Debts have grown to previously unthinkable levels.

Understandable

In many ways, it is not surprising that people are latching onto various authoritarian leaders in these times. They are promising a return to normalcy through strength. And, when it turns out that they cannot actually bring about a return to normalcy, these authoritarian leaders naturally turn to conquest as a way of protecting their power.

It has always worked like that – a tale as old as time. It is how the Pharaoh came to power in Egypt and how it has worked ever since.

So let us not be angry at those who, in uncertain times, turn to such leaders. Our anger at them won't change anything. But the question we need to ask as believers is: where is God? What is God doing to bring justice to the world in such times?

A Story for Trying Times

When the people of Israel despaired throughout their history as they suffered at the hands of various empires, they kept coming back to this story. The story of the battle of the Red Sea was what convinced them that their God would save them. It gave them hope in the face of trying times. That's why they kept telling it.

The battle of the Red Sea was not a battle that the Hebrews won by superior weaponry or tactics. They were at a tactical disadvantage in every way you can imagine. They were just running away and doing it on foot. The Egyptian chariotry was the most advanced military force that the world had ever seen and would ever see for many centuries. It should have annihilated them. But the Hebrews won.

A Strange Kind of Victory

And sure, you can say that God won the battle for them. But God didn't do that by making them stronger or better fighters. God didn't allow them to defeat the Egyptians on Egyptian terms. Instead, what did God do? God clogged the chariot wheels. God turned the Egyptian advantage into their downfall.

And I believe that that is God's favourite approach. God loves to use the very things that the powerful put their trust in, the very things that they think make them invincible, to bring about their defeat.

Ukraine

We are seeing that very thing playing out in our world right now. When, for example, Russia invaded Ukraine over four years ago, the consensus everywhere was that Ukraine could not resist them. Russia had all the advantages with their conventional military resources, equipment and population. But things didn't quite work out that way.

The chariot wheels got clogged. That happened literally when whole convoys were unable to advance through the Ukrainian mud in the initial assault. But it happened even more so as Ukraine transformed warfare itself by developing drone technology that was relatively cheap to fly but crushingly expensive to defend against. Russia's strength became its weakness as its resource base and economy have been targeted.

Iran

The shorter-term Iran war has played out in similar terms. Iran is outmatched in almost every way. It doesn't have the military or equipment to defend itself against the largest and best-funded military force that the world has ever seen. And yet, it hasn't been crushed. Using relatively inexpensive drones and other weapons, it is holding its own and requiring the Americans to spend many resources with little to show for it.

Nothing Good

And of course, none of this is good. It is terrible to see so many lives being sacrificed and so much destruction playing out. I take no pleasure in it; neither does God. I recognize that the Russian soldiers who are dying in Ukraine are victims of empire just as much as the Ukrainians are.

But the principle at work is this: If you are going to build empires with chariots, God is going to clog those chariot wheels. If you think you are going to make yourself safe by funding enormous militaries, by invading and bombing girls' schools and civilian infrastructure, God will turn your strength and your callous disregard for life against you.

And sure, we might wish for God to act differently. We'd prefer it if God just took Pharaoh out before he decided to enslave the world. But, for whatever reason, the world doesn't work like that. Maybe God has something for us to learn from seeing how those chariot wheels get clogged.

Personal Application

There is a lesson in this for you in your personal life. How many of us try to build a sense of safety and security for ourselves through dominance? You think that if you control everything around you and make people behave as you like, you will have a good life.

To the extent that you do that, you are deploying your chariots. If you do that, sooner or later something will come along to clog the wheels. And when that happens, you will have a choice. You might choose to double down and assert more control. That will put you into a downward spiral of more loss of control, more clogged wheels. You will be dealing with anger and resistance.

Or, when the chariot wheels of your life are getting clogged, you can make another choice. You can choose to let go of control, embrace the stories that other people in your life are living through and give them the freedom to be their own people on the other side of the Red Sea. None of that may sound easy, but it might be exactly the new thing that God is calling you to do.

Finding Hope in Difficult Times

So, apply this in your personal life. Watch for where in your life the chariot wheels are getting clogged. Be ready to ask why and to find other ways to move forward in your life than by blowing people away with your chariotry.

And, if you ever become discouraged when you see the powerful of this world deploying their chariots, if you see empires on the move, sweeping all away before them, and the tech lords and oligarchs of this world are seeking to take control of all of our data and our political systems, and people start renaming lakes on a whim just because they can, watch out for the mud that will absolutely start clogging the chariot wheels of those who build empires. God just loves to clog those wheels.