

Exodus 4:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn.

Analysis

And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn (ואמר לך)—God's demand and threat: **Let my son go, that he may serve me** (שליח את-בנִי וַיַּעֲבֹדָנִי)—Israel's purpose is worship/service (עבד, avad). They exchange slavery to Pharaoh for service to YHWH. The threat: **I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn** (הַרְגֵ אֶת-בָתֶךָ בְּכֶךָ)—lex talionis (eye for eye): you enslaved My firstborn, I'll kill yours. This previews the tenth plague (12:29-30) when all Egypt's firstborn die. The threat establishes moral framework—Pharaoh's refusal costs his nation's children. God gives ample warning; judgment comes only after repeated rejection. The Exodus becomes cosmic battle between YHWH and Pharaoh over whose "son" will serve whom.

Historical Context

The tenth plague's horrific devastation—death of all Egyptian firstborn—is foreshadowed here in Moses' initial message. God's justice is precise: Pharaoh kills Hebrew baby boys (1:22), so God takes Egyptian firstborn sons. Pharaoh enslaves God's firstborn son Israel, so God kills Pharaoh's firstborn son. The literary structure emphasizes divine justice executing appropriate judgment on those who harm God's chosen people.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does the exchange—"Let My son go to serve Me"—illustrate that freedom from one master means service to another (Romans 6:15-23)?
2. What does God's warning to Pharaoh about the firstborn teach about His patience in giving opportunity for repentance before executing judgment?

Interlinear Text

וַיֹּאמֶר נָאָתָּה לְשָׁלֹחַ וְאַל יְבַטְּחֵנִי בְּנֵךְ יְמִינָתְךָ
And I say H413 go H853 thy son H1121 that he may serve H5647

בְּתַתְמָאָה וְלְשָׁלֹחַ וְאַנְכִּי הַבָּהָה הַגְּדוּלָה
me and if thou refuse H3985 go H2009 H595 behold I will slay H2026 thy son H1121

בְּכָרְבָּהּ:
even thy firstborn H1060

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 11:5 (Parallel theme): And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maid servant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts.

Exodus 12:29 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass, that at midnight the LORD smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat

on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle.

Psalms 135:8 (Parallel theme): Who smote the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and beast.

Psalms 105:36 (Parallel theme): He smote also all the firstborn in their land, the chief of all their strength.

Psalms 78:51 (Parallel theme): And smote all the firstborn in Egypt; the chief of their strength in the tabernacles of Ham:

Exodus 5:1 (Parallel theme): And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness.

Exodus 7:16 (Parallel theme): And thou shalt say unto him, The LORD God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness: and, behold, hitherto thou wouldest not hear.