



BSFL: Exodus 3:7; 12:30

A "Cry of Pain"

I N E X O D U S



By Kevin C. Peacock

MOST “CRIES” IN EXODUS ARE BECAUSE of anguish or pain. Such was the “cry” of the Israelites because of their oppression (Ex. 2:23), increased labor (5:8), and unreasonable workloads (v. 15). Such was the “cry” of the Egyptians when they lost their firstborn (12:30). The Israelites “cried out” to Yahweh in fear at the Red Sea (14:10,15), and Moses “cried out” to God in moments of crisis (8:12; 15:25; 17:4).¹ These snapshots employ a term filled with pathos and emotion, spelled in two ways: *s’q* and *z’q*, (pronounced *tšaaq* and *zaaq*, respectively) used interchangeably even within the same passage.² *S’q/z’q* occurs in the Old Testament 128 times as verbs and 39 times as nouns. It is mainly used in a situation of acute distress or when someone faced a tragedy or imminent threat—making it “a cry of pain and a plea for help.”³

A Cry of Pain

S’q is usually loud and full of emotion (Eccl. 9:17), akin to shouting. Most any dire or trying circumstance could prompt such a cry. People cried out in fear, such as the fear of attack (Jer. 47:2) or death (Jonah 3:7, see vv. 4-7). Mordecai wailed because of the decree to kill the Jews (Esth. 4:1), and the medium of Endor screamed in terror when she recognized Saul and Samuel (1 Sam. 28:12). Elisha’s disciples cried out after they ate a poisonous gourd by mistake (2 Kings 4:40).⁴

Sometimes *s’q* is because of distress and pain. When Ammon raped Tamar, her cry was filled with deep emotion and pathos (2 Sam. 13:19). Job cried out for justice (Job 19:7); the oppressed and afflicted often cry out in pain (34:28). Sodom and Gomorrah’s wickedness caused an “outcry” that God heard (Gen. 18:20), much like the blood of Abel (4:10). Those suffering God’s judgment would cry out in distress (Isa. 33:7; Lam. 2:18), especially after seeing the blessings of the righteous (Isa. 65:14).⁵

Many times grief over a loss caused *s’q*. David’s cry was loud and bitter when his son Absalom was killed (2 Sam. 19:4), as was Esau’s when he lost his father’s blessing (Gen. 27:34). The inhabitants of a destroyed city would cry out in grief (Jer. 48:5; Zeph. 1:10), as did the Israelites in defeat and when they lost of the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:14).

The Old Testament is thus replete with different circumstances that caused *s’q*. Such laments could be communal (Joel 1:14; Neh. 9:4), individual (Jonah 1:5;

Pss. 9:12; 142:1), or offered as a prayer in behalf of someone else (Ex. 8:8; 1 Sam. 7:9).⁶

A Plea for Help

Most of the time *s’q* was towards someone who could give aid. The pagans cried out to their idols and pagan gods, seeking assistance (Judg. 10:14; Isa. 46:7). But sometimes the recipient was an authority figure such as the king. The Egyptians cried out to Pharaoh for food during the famine (Gen. 41:55); and the Israelites cried out to Pharaoh when their labor was increased (Ex. 5:8,15), begging for mercy. Sometimes people directed the cry to the prophet such as Moses (Num. 11:1-2) or Elisha (2 Kings 4:1,40; 6:5).⁷

But almost half of the occurrences of *s’q* describe a call to God for help, describing earnest prayer with deep emotions (Joel 1:13-14; Neh. 9:4; compare Mark 15:34).⁸ The certainty that God hears the pleas of people undergirds these cries (Ex. 3:7; Num. 20:16), pleas that sometimes need not even be verbalized (Gen. 4:10; compare Job 16:18). God promised a hearing to people calling out for justice (Ex. 22:23,27). He would answer (1 Sam. 7:9; Ps. 77:1; Isa. 30:19) and intervene to save (2 Chron. 20:9; Pss. 22:5; 34:17). Thus, God’s people could have confidence when they came to Him with their petitions. Sometimes, though, God chided them for not crying out to Him from their hearts (Hos. 7:14; 8:2) or challenged them for calling out to foreign gods (Judg. 10:14; Isa. 46:7; 57:13).⁹

At times, however, God seemingly chose not to attend to their cries and answer. Sometimes He allowed His people to suffer (Job 19:7) or undergo judgment (Lam. 3:8), driving them to search for Him earnestly (Pss. 77:1,7-10; 88:1; 142:1,5-7). If the people remained disobedient and stubborn in their sin (1 Sam. 8:18; Jer. 11:11-13; Mic. 3:4) and in their unrepentant state, He would refuse to hear their calls to Him (Isa. 59:1-2). But those turning to Him in both brokenness and trust would find His gracious listening ear (30:19),



Right: Mud brick stamped with the cartouche of Pharaoh Ramses II

from Thebes. The Egyptians used mud bricks for construction of

temple walls and storerooms; dated about 1279-1213 B.C.

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not only Israelites but foreigners as well (19:20).¹⁰ God promised a day when He would remake heaven and earth; His kingdom would be fully established, and the sound of *s'q* would never be heard again (65:17,19).

The Story of the Exodus

Exodus helps us understand the relation between people's cries and the God who hears. The Israelites "cried out" to God because of their oppression (Ex. 2:23), the first mention of such prayer in Exodus. They had now lost their love for Egypt, their home for 400 years, and were ready to leave and seek a new home—God's intent all along (Gen. 15:13-21). God heard their cry, saw their need, entered into their experience, and was moved to action because of His covenant with their forefathers (Ex. 2:24-25). The Israelites' plight ["misery," "cries of pain" (*s'q*), "slave drivers," "suffering" (3:7)] was met with God's saving character (vv. 8-9); and God sent Moses to be His agent of salvation (v. 10).

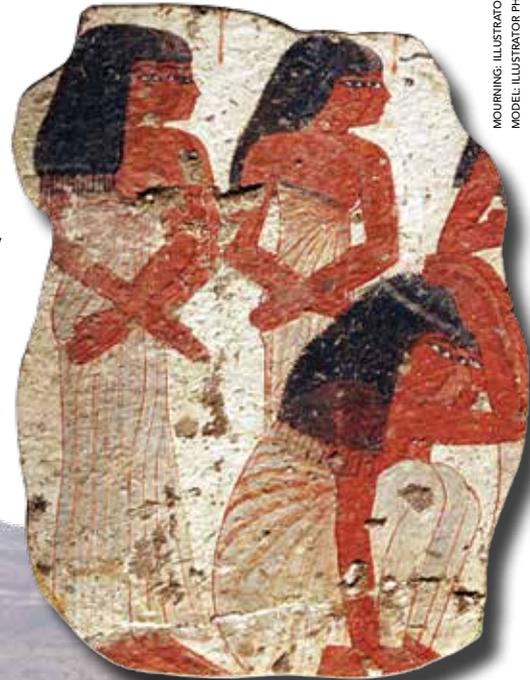
Fearing that the Israelites would take over the land, the pharaoh of the oppression made three attempts to control them. First, he forced them into hard labor (1:8-14), hoping that this would kill off Israelite men or that time away from home would hinder multiplication. Second, he ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the male infants, an action the midwives were unwilling to do (vv. 15-21). Third, he ordered his people to throw the male Hebrew infants into the Nile River (v. 22), seeking mass genocide.

In time, God called Moses to lead His people out of Egyptian bondage. When Moses made demands for the Israelites to be released, Pharaoh increased the workload; making conditions even more unbearable (5:1-19). God, therefore, unleashed 10 plagues upon Egypt, and with

the final plague all of the firstborn males of Egypt died, causing "a great cry of anguish [*s'q*]" throughout the land (11:6). Every Egyptian home with a firstborn male was affected as they awoke to find their children and livestock dead, causing "a loud wailing [*s'q*]" throughout Egypt (12:30). As the Egyptians had killed Israelite sons (1:22) and had oppressed God's firstborn (4:22-23), now God took the Egyptian firstborn, repaying them for their wrongdoing (Gen. 12:3). The cry of the Egyptians matched the cry of anguish of the Israelites.

As the Israelites departed Egypt, Pharaoh changed his mind, no longer willing to lose his work force. He gathered his army and chased the Israelites to the shore of the Red Sea. Seeing Pharaoh's army, the Israelites "cried out [*s'q*] to the Lord for help," then they blamed Moses for their plight (Ex. 14:10-11). Their cry was mixed with distrust of God's power and the wisdom of God's servant. As Moses "cried out" (*s'q*) to God (v. 15), the Lord commanded him to raise his staff and march the people

Right: Image depicting Egyptian women mourning. From Egypt's 18th Dynasty (1570-1293 B.C.), this painting originally decorated a tomb chapel. The image depicts women in a funerary procession. Some of the women are crying; others are placing ashes on their heads; from Thebes. In Egyptian culture, the men and women typically mourned separately.



Left: The Nile River; feeling threatened by the growing Hebrew population, "Pharaoh then commanded all his people: 'You must throw every son born to the Hebrews into the Nile, but let every daughter live'" (Ex. 1:22, HCSB).



The Suez Gulf which separates Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula. The Hebrews would have crossed on the northern end of the gulf, at a place called in Hebrew *Yam Suph* and known in Scripture as the Red Sea.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (44/1702)

Left: Dated 2000–1900 B.C. (patriarchal period), painted Egyptian model of a grain storage unit. Four compartments, each accessible by individual openings in the roof, represented the four attic compartments where

grain was actually stored. Just as Joseph had seen in his dream, Egypt was hit with a famine: “Extreme hunger came to all the land of Egypt, and the people cried out to Pharaoh for food” (Gen. 41:55a, HCSB).

Above: The hill that was the ancient site of Ebenezer. In battle, the Philistines were victorious over the Israelites in this area. Upset, the Israelites retrieved the ark of the covenant and

brought it into the next battle against the Philistines. Using the ark like a good-luck charm, the Israelites ended up losing miserably to the Philistines. Victorious, the Philistines captured

the ark and took it back with them to their own camp. So, the Israelites ended up losing the very thing that they thought could and would save them, the ark of the covenant.

through the sea on dry ground; He would take care of the Egyptians. Moses followed God’s orders, the waters divided, and the people marched to safety. As the Egyptians perished they recognized Israel’s God as the cause of their defeat (v. 25), as God had promised (vv. 4,18). Reading the story even centuries later, one can almost hear the Egyptians’ cries of terror and anguish as the sea waters began to fold in, seemingly from every direction. **B**

1. The “cry” (Hebrew, *bkh*) of baby Moses (Ex. 2:6) is the normal term for crying, involving tears. The “cries” (Hebrew, *’nh*) of the Israelites at Sinai were of loud singing (32:17-18).

2. For instance, Gen. 18:20,21; Ex. 2:23; 3:7,9; Judg. 10:10,12; 1 Sam. 4:13,14; Neh. 5:1,6; Ps. 107:6,13,19,28; Jer. 48:3,4, and others. The spelling difference is probably due to variations of dialect. The *t* and *z* pronunciations are transliterations from the *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, gen. ed. Robert L. Thomas (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1981), Hebrew-Aramaic Dictionary, entry numbers 2199 and 6817.

3. R. Albertz, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out) in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 3:1089. Henceforth in this article, *s’q* will refer to either spelling of the term.

4. In a few usages of the term, the causative and passive stems are a technical term for rallying troops to face an enemy (Judg. 4:10,13; 6:34; 7:23-24; 12:1-2; 1 Sam. 13:4; 2 Sam. 20:4-5). This is may also denote a sense of fear. R. Albertz, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out), 1091.

5. A. H. Konkel, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out) in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE], gen. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:827-830. See also Konkel’s article in the same dictionary, “זעק” (*z’q*, call for help) in NIDOTTE, 1:1131-32.

6. Albertz, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out), 1092.

7. Konkel, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out), 3:828-29.

8. Albertz states that 64 of 128 verbal and 10 of 39 noun usages address God either explicitly or implicitly. Albertz, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out), 1089, 1092.

9. Konkel, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out), 3:829.

10. Albertz, “צעק” (*s’q*, to cry out), 1092-93.

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