

BRICKS WITHOUT STRAW

As a result of the incident described in Exodus 5.4-19, this expression has become proverbial for the assignment of a task without the necessary means to fulfill it. However, a problem has arisen because the passage does not say why straw should be needed for making bricks.

The passage makes it clear that Pharaoh withdrew the straw in order to make the task of the Israelites harder. If the straw was needed as a binder, its withdrawal would lower the quality of the bricks, which could hardly be Pharaoh's purpose, but one might wonder in what way it would make the task more arduous. The late Professor T. Eric Peet, Professor of Egyptology in the University of Liverpool, in his extremely critical book, Egypt and the Old Testament, spoke of this passage as follows: "In Egypt....though straw has been used both in ancient and modern times, its use is somewhat rare, more particularly in ancient times. What is more, the writer of this passage in the narrative is certainly under some strange delusion as to the function of the straw when used. Its purpose is to bind the mud more tightly together, though as a matter of fact the Nile mud coheres so well of itself that no binding material is really necessary. Consequently the refusal of the task-masters to provide the Israelites with straw would not in the slightest degree increase the difficulty of their labours. As a piece of local colour the whole incident is unsatisfactory, and goes to prove the writer's ignorance of Egyptian customs rather than his close acquaintance with them, as is so often averred."

Peet's criticism raises serious questions. It is not merely Moses' accuracy that is involved. Jesus Christ rested weighty matters upon quotations from the books of Moses, and always referred to them as authoritative and true. He could not be wrong on such a vital point, and still be God incarnate. How can the problem be explained?