



THE EGYPTIAN BONDAGE (Exodus 1:1-22)

As the book of Exodus opens, we find a recap of the close of Genesis, thus showing that the one is a continuation of the other.

I. THE YEARS OF INCREASE (Exodus 1:1-7)

A. The Early Years in Goshen

Among the several subdivisions of ancient Egypt was that eastern portion of the Nile Delta which was called the land of Goshen. It was a region of about a thousand square miles, extremely fertile and near one of the river mouths which provided irrigation water. This land was excellent for cattle, sheep and agriculture. Although the Egyptians detested those who tended sheep and goats (Genesis 46:34), they themselves had cattle and horses (horses were probably introduced into Egypt by an invading people called the Hyksos). In that delightful setting the descendants of Jacob prospered for many decades. They raised cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic, crops watered by the Nile (Numbers 11:5, Deuteronomy 11:10). In the outlying region eastward they tended their flocks and herds (Genesis 47:1). It is possible also that it was during these years that many of them learned the arts and sciences of Egypt, such as carpentry, weaving, and pottery, among others (I Chronicles 4:14,21, 23). -

B. The Purpose of God

In the first chapter of the Book of Exodus, we see the hand of God providentially working to fulfill His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This He had done by bringing Joseph to Egypt and by their prospering and growth during the time of Pharaoh's favor. While Egypt was being reduced to servitude (Gen. 47:20-21), the household of Jacob was prospering (Gen. 47:11-12, 27; Ex. 1:7). The phenomenal numerical growth of Israel continued, even after the rise to power of a new king who established a policy of cruelty and oppression toward the Israelites (Exod. 1:8ff). In Exodus 1 we see the faith of the Hebrew midwives evidenced in their determination to save the boy babies contrasted with the Pharaoh's fervent efforts to kill them.

Whether settled or nomadic, whether in urban or rural areas, the dwellers in Goshen nevertheless were there for a very specific purpose: God was preparing them for the great task of preserving and declaring the unchangeable truths concerning Himself. These truths need to be known by all men everywhere. And, whereas God had at first manifested Himself directly to men (see, for example, Genesis 3:8-19, 6:13-21, 9:1-17), from Abraham on He chose to do so through that patriarch and his family. Therefore, this family must now be even more fully prepared for this great task, for God would soon begin to inspire men to write His Word.

The four-century period when Israel was living in Egypt may be summarized from both negative and positive viewpoints.

1. "Negative" preparation

It was God's purpose to preserve His people from extinction during the years of famine. It was also necessary to protect them from the evil influences and threats of the pagan peoples of Canaan, inasmuch as they were yet few in number and otherwise unprepared for their later great mission.

2. "Positive" preparation

Goshen was a land of plenty and the Israelites absorbed the best of Egyptian culture. No doubt many learned to read and write abilities which critics of the Bible long denied to people of this age, but since proven to be a fact. In these and other ways, Israel's existence in Egypt was for the purpose of preparing them to be a strong nation.

Exodus Lesson 2

"These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the offspring of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt." (Exodus 1:1-5 RSV)

And so Jacob, whose name God had changed to Israel, entered Egypt. All of the Israelites that existed in the world at the time were in that small group. They would remain there for 430 years (Exodus 12:40-41) until the Exodus.

"But the descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them." (Exodus 1:7 RSV).

Although there is no record of the precise number that left Egypt in the Exodus, a military census taken not long after listed the number of men 20 years of age and older who could serve in the army as 603,550 (Exodus 38:26). From that number, the total Israelite population of that time has been estimated at approximately 2 to 3 million.

How can a small group become a nation of *millions* in just over 4 centuries? A simple bit of arithmetic shows that it was easily possible. If the average Israelite family consisted of 4 children by the time the parents were 27 years old (the Bible record shows that families then were actually much larger), that would provide for a doubling of the population every 27 years (2 children to replace the parents, and 2 children to account for population growth). 430 years divided by 27 years is about 15 generations during the time Israel was in Egypt.

Beginning with the original 70 people, growth of the Israelite nation using our factors above would have been:

- 140 people after 27 years
- 280 people after 54 years
- 560 people after 81 years
- 1,120 people after 108 years
- 2,240 people after 135 years
- 4,480 people after 162 years
- 8,960 people after 189 years
- 17,920 people after 216 years
- 35,840 people after 243 years
- 71,680 people after 270 years
- 143,360 people after 297 years
- 286,720 people after 324 years
- 573,440 people after 351 years
- 1,146,880 people after 378 years
- 2,293,760 people after 405 years

The example is of course a rough estimate, but it does prove the point that the Israelites could easily have increased to a great number in the given time.

II. THE OPPRESSION (Exodus 1:8-22)

It has often been the experience of both nations and individuals that some kind of social, political, or economic pressure, although looked upon at the time as unwelcome, even unbearable, has nonetheless been the means of "toughening" for a hard road ahead. Although God had long preserved His people in a remarkable way, giving them peace and prosperity, the time came when their Egyptian sojourn turned into bondage. Perhaps you can look back in your own life and see how an illness, a financial loss, the moving away of a friend or some similar "disaster" was subsequently seen to be a blessing. It was the experience of this writer to be confined in bed for a total of fifteen months, much of the time with feelings of bitterness, only to discover in later life that God was using that confinement to shape attitudes and circumstances to prove the truth of Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (The New International Version). Although the Israelites were no doubt tempted, as you and I have been tempted, to think that God had forgotten them, He was still there. And they knew He would deliver them, that is, if they remembered His promise made to Abraham many centuries earlier:

“Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions” (Gen. 15:13-14). On his death bed, Joseph had repeated the promise to his family: “God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here” (Genesis 50:24b).

A. The First Attempt: The Taskmasters (Exodus 1:8-14)

In due course of time, after a period of being unmolested in Goshen, “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (verse 8). This does not mean, of course, that he was not acquainted with Joseph himself, since the patriarch had long since died, but that he did not look with pleasure on the Egyptian residence of the Israelites. Other Pharaohs had done so, but it is possible that this new king was the first of a new dynasty, and a change of policy took place. The blessings of Joseph’s wise and beneficial administration had outlasted his life. His willingness to trust God even during the more difficult days of his life made it possible for God to shape them as He desired, to the subsequent blessing of many. The apostle Peter expressed a similar thought when he wrote, “And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you may be able to call these things to mind” (II Peter 1:15).

In time, however, it was God’s will that oppression of Israel begin. And, just as the agony of physical exercise will build up the body and make it stronger, so the pressure on Israel shaped the people for God’s divine and eternal purpose for them and for all mankind.

The reasons given for the new Egyptian policy was that they (the Israelites) ‘were more and mightier than we’ (verse 9). And, since Pharaoh feared that Israel might not support Egypt in any future war, indeed, might fight against Egypt, he sought some way to reduce them to impotence. The method he hit on was to turn Goshen into a kind of slave camp, every Israeli being forced into hard labor. The results are stated in the next verses.

When Joseph brought his family to be with him in Egypt, they came to the “best of the land” (Gen. 47:6,11). Even at this time there was an underlying prejudice against the Israelites as Hebrews (Gen. 43:32) and as shepherds (Gen. 46:34). There is considerable disagreement among the scholars as to the identity of this “new king, who did not know about Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). Much of the problem hinges on the date of the Exodus. Keeping with an early date for the Exodus, it is most likely that the king referred to here was new in a very significant sense. He represented not only a new person, but also very likely a new dynasty.

An Asiatic people of Semitic origin (thus, related to the Hebrews) began to migrate into Egypt, eventually gaining control of the government at a time of weakness and confusion during the Second Intermediate Period. The Hyksos ruled for about 150 years during the time of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt, from about 1700 to 1550 B.C. The Hyksos kings were “Egyptianized,” assuming the title of Pharaoh, and adopting the gods of Egypt. The Hyksos capital was very close to Goshen where the Israelites had settled in Egypt. It would seem that the “new king” of Exodus 1:8 was a Hyksos king, and he would thus truly be “new” as Moses has indicated, especially if he succeeded an Egyptian king. Note also that he is not called an Egyptian. Some have speculated that the Pharaoh was an Assyrian, based on Isaiah 10:24. In the light of these considerations, we might interpret verse 10: “Come on, let us [Hyksos or Assyrians] deal wisely with them [Israelites], lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when war occurs, they join also unto our enemies [the Egyptians], and fight against us [Hyksos or Assyrians], and so get them up out of the land.”

If indeed a small minority of Hyksos or Assyrians had gained control over Egypt, it is not a surprise that these “foreigners” would have had no knowledge of Joseph. In fact, there would very likely be a tendency to try to blot out the past and to create a new allegiance to the new dynasty. It would also explain the fear of the new king that the Israelites might join with their enemies (the Egyptians) to overthrow their (foreign) rule.

Pharaoh feared the numerical strength of the Israelites, and sought to diminish them. He feared that they would become allies with the enemy against their rule, and would overcome them and leave Egypt. Interestingly, everything Pharaoh feared came to pass, in spite of his diligent efforts to prevent it. The reason is, of course, that the Pharaoh’s plans were contrary to the purposes and promises of God with regard to His people.

Pharaoh’s plan, which was readily adopted by the people, was to enslave the Israelites, and to tighten their control over them. A substantial part of this plan seems to be that of intimidation and oppression, so demoralizing and frightening the Israelites that they would not dare to resist their masters. In addition, their value as slave labor would be utilized to strengthen the nation both economically and militarily. The storage

cities of Pithom and Rameses¹⁶ were built by the Israelites with brick and mortar, and the fields were worked by them as well. Josephus claims that Israelite manpower was also used to dig canals.

Just as Israel had greatly multiplied during the time of Joseph (cf. Gen. 47:27) and after his death (Exod. 1:7), so they continued to multiply under the cruel hand of their taskmasters: But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly (Exod. 1:12-13).

Under the new policy it was possible to build new cities for the storage of food and munitions. This was a common practice in ancient times, where transportation was very primitive and supply lines often very long. These two cities were located in the delta region; there is archaeological and historical evidence of their being built in ancient times in northeastern Egypt. Rameses has been identified with the later city called Tanis or Zoan (see Psalm 78:12, 43). Pithom was a short distance to the south.

If Pharaoh thought the hard work would reduce the size and strength of the children of Israel, he was much disappointed. The pressure only caused them to multiply and increase in strength!

The Egyptians assumed that more labor was necessary for these unwelcome foreigners, so an even more rigorous oppression was ordered. This probably meant longer hours, more difficult work, and greater penalties for disobedience or laziness.

B. The Second Attempt: The Decree of Death to New-born Males (Exodus 1:15-22)

It may be that the first attempt was continued for some time, long enough at least to prove that it was not working. This second oppression may have been initiated by a new Pharaoh. In any case this new anti-Israeli measure was an especially insidious one: only Jewish girl babies were to be allowed to live! To this end the ruler instructed two (perhaps the chief) Hebrew midwives (verses 15-16). The names of these two women, Shiphrah and Puah, have been recorded as a testimony to their trust in God and their refusal to obey the murderous command (verse 17). With regard to the fact that they did not tell Pharaoh the truth (verses 18-19), Augustine once remarked, God forgave the evil on account of the good, and rewarded their piety, though not their deceit." The command to kill was morally wrong, and it would have been morally wrong to obey it. (For a parallel case, see Joshua 2:1-6).

Since this scheme did not work (verse 20), the king then went beyond the midwives to his own people, ordering them to throw every newborn son into the river. It seems obvious that he meant only Hebrew babies; in fact, some manuscripts of this passage read, "Every son who is born to the Hebrews you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive." Some critics have objected to such merciless instructions, feeling that no Pharaoh would have ordered such a thing nor would the Egyptians have carried it out if he had. But in ancient times such disregard for human life, even new-born life, was not uncommon. Neglect of unwanted children to the point of their death was often the practice.

Pharaoh's demands are incredible. First of all, this is an abominable act of violence against the innocent. Second, I am amazed that Pharaoh passes on all responsibility for the death of these Hebrew infants. He wants the midwives to solve this national dilemma of the Hebrew birth rate. The plan is virtually unworkable. How were the boy children to be "terminated"? Were the deaths to look accidental? How could Pharaoh expect any Hebrew woman to call for a midwife if it were known that all boy babies were somehow dying at their hand? Here we see a poorly conceived (pardon the pun) plan, decreed by a desperate man.

It is interesting to note that Pharaoh did not declare all-out war on the inhabitants of Goshen. Although the number and strength of the Israelites is still a matter of conjecture, it appears from Exodus 1:7, 12, and 20 that they were sufficient to cause the king to resort to treachery rather than a direct confrontation.

Hyatt suggests one possible reason why child-bearing may have been a special blessing to these midwives: "It is possible that barren women were regularly used as midwives; if so, their reward is that they become fertile and have families." J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* The blessing of bearing children was not denied the Hebrew women, and neither was it denied the Hebrew midwives.

There is another blessing not as apparent but very significant, I believe. If someone asked you the names of the midwives, what would you answer? From this text you could quickly respond, "Shiphrah and Puah." Now if I asked you the names of any of the pharaohs mentioned in this chapter, could you respond from this text? No! Many have speculated as to the identity of the pharaohs, but this is still speculation. Think of it, the highest official in the land, old "what's his name." These men's names were known and feared by millions, but we don't even know who they were. And this in spite of such massive projects as the building of pyramids and extensive efforts as mummifying the bodies of kings.

Exodus Lesson 2

The first chapter of Exodus closes, therefore, with a plan, which, if successful, would have meant the eventual extermination of the Hebrews, in keeping with Pharaoh's wish. But, as we shall see, God was about to use the very device of the Egyptian king to set the stage for Israel's preservation. Despite the obvious naturalness of all these arrangements and events, there was intermingled with them a supernatural process and purpose not evident at the time. But, in later years it would become apparent that God used the oppressive years in Egypt to begin the preparation of Israel as a nation and also of Israel's great deliverer, a man named Moses.

CONCLUSION

"Noting these benefits of the Egyptian sojourn, we can see that God was providentially working for the benefit of His people. We can therefore derive several principles from this passage which will help us in those times when the hand of God is not evident and when the forces of evil seem to be prevailing.

First, God's purposes are being fulfilled, even when we are not actively involved in bringing them to pass.

Second, God's purposes are being fulfilled, even when we are not aware of it and when every appearance points to the contrary.

Third, when this is the case, God has often previously announced prophetically what He is going to do during such times of apparent silence.

Fourth, when God is "silent" we must live by faith (as at all other times) and by the principles of His word.

Fifth, God's purposes are as easily achieved in adversity as they are in comfort, and as readily accomplished through unbelievers as through the saints.

*Sixth, there are great similarities between these experiences of Israel and the events of the last days before our Lord's return." -Bob Deffinbaugh, Th.M -
<http://www.bible.org/docs/ot/books/exo/deffin/exo-01.htm>*