

Oppression: The Background *and the Birth of Moses*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 1:1–22; Gen. 37:26–28; Gen. 39:2, 21; Acts 7:6; Gal. 3:16, 17; Exod. 2:1–25.*

Memory Text: “The children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them” (*Exodus 2:23–25, NKJV*).

The book of Exodus resonates with accounts of the oppressed, the marginalized, the persecuted, the exploited, and the degraded. Thus, people today who feel abandoned, forgotten, and enslaved can find hope, because the same God who saved the Hebrews can save them as well.

The book of Exodus speaks to the existential battles of life and to the injustices and trials that are part of this life. Everyone can be encouraged by the stories of God's interventions in favor of His suffering people. God hears the cry of the oppressed, sees their struggles, notes their tears, and, in their agony, comes to help.

God takes the initiative to deliver those who trust in Him. We need simply to accept, by faith, what He offers us. This is why the book of Exodus should be studied, for it points to what Jesus has done for us all. It is a book about redemption, deliverance, and final salvation—all of which are ours, by faith, in Christ Jesus and what He has secured for us.

In the midst of the turmoil and darkness, if our eyes are fixed on God, we can recognize His presence, care, and help as He guides us to the eternal Promised Land.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 5.

God's People in Egypt

The book of Exodus is called in Hebrew *shemot*, literally “names” in English, according to the opening words of that ancient document. “And these are the names” is how it begins. The names of the patriarch Jacob’s family are enumerated right at the start.

Read Exodus 1:1–7. What crucial truth is found here?

The book of Exodus begins with a reminder of God’s blessing. When the patriarch Jacob and his family settled in Egypt, they were only 70 people (*Gen. 46:27, Exod. 1:5*); but the Israelites “were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them” (*Exod. 1:7, NKJV*). By the time of the Exodus, however, they counted “about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children” (*Exod. 12:37, NKJV*).

Read Exodus 1:8–11. What was the situation of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus?

The biblical text paints the story of the children of Israel in Egypt in dark colors. The book of Exodus begins with their enslavement by Egyptian taskmasters and the oppressive labor that they imposed upon the Hebrews. The book of Exodus ends, however, with God’s peaceful and comforting presence in the tabernacle, at the center of the Israelite camp (*see Exodus 40*). In between these two opposite poles, God’s triumph is described. By the Lord’s liberating His people from slavery, by His opening the Red Sea, and by His defeating the strongest army of that time, God’s spectacular victory over the forces of evil is revealed.

The story paradoxically stresses that the more the oppressors “afflicted them [the Israelites], the more they multiplied and grew” (*Exod. 1:12, NKJV*). That is, no matter the human machinations, God is still sovereign and will save His people, even if circumstances appear hopeless, at least from a human perspective.

A new king arose who knew not Joseph. What does this account tell us about how we should never take circumstances, especially good ones, for granted?

The Historical Background

When Jacob's family arrived in Egypt after experiencing famine in Canaan (*Genesis 46*), the Egyptian king was friendly toward the Hebrews because of Joseph and all that he had done for the Egyptians.

"And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph's hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. And he had him ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried out before him, 'Bow the knee!' So he set him over all the land of Egypt" (*Gen. 41:41–43, NKJV*).

What was the key to Joseph's amazing success in Egypt after such a rough start? (Read *Gen. 37:26–28* and *Gen. 39:2, 21*.)

The most plausible historical background to the Joseph story is the following: the new ruler, in Exodus 1:8 (*ESV*), "who did not know Joseph," is Ahmose (1580–1546 BC). Next came Amenhotep I (1553–1532 BC), the ruler who feared the Israelites and oppressed them. Later Thutmose I (1532–1514 BC) issued the death decree for all the Hebrew male children. His daughter Hatshepsut (1504–1482 BC) was the princess who adopted Moses to be her son. Pharaoh Thutmose III (1504–1450 BC), who was for some time coregent with Hatshepsut, was the pharaoh of the Exodus.

The Exodus occurred, according to the best calculations, in March 1450 BC (see William H. Shea, "Exodus, Date of the," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al., vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982], pp. 230–238). To understand the time of the Exodus, study the following biblical texts: *Gen. 15:13–16*; *Exod. 12:40, 41*; *Judg. 11:26*; and *1 Kings 6:1* (see also *Acts 7:6*; *Gal. 3:16, 17*).

The first chapter of Exodus covers a long period—from the time of Joseph, when his father, Jacob, with the entire family entered Egypt, to Pharaoh's death decree. Though some debate exists over the exact number of years, what matters is that, even with His people enslaved in a foreign land, the Lord did not forget them.

That is, even though many details about the Hebrews in Egypt at that time remain hidden, at least for now (see *1 Cor. 13:12*), the revelation of God's character still shines through the pages of this book, as it does all through Scripture. We can know that no matter how bad things seem, God is always there, and we can trust Him in whatever bad situation we find ourselves.

The Hebrew Midwives

One cannot understand the book of Exodus without presupposing the teachings of Genesis. The Jews moved to Egypt, and, after a time of great prosperity and peace, they were enslaved.

But God did not abandon His people to their problems, even though it may sometimes have seemed so. No doubt many of the Hebrew people despaired of their plight. Yet, in the time of distress, God comes to help with His mighty hand. Our Lord encourages His followers: “Call upon Me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me” (*Ps. 50:15, NKJV*).

Read Exodus 1:9–21. What key role did the faithful midwives play, and why are they remembered in history?

No pharaoh has a name in the book of Exodus. They carry the title of “Pharaoh” only, which means “king.” The Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was a god on earth, the son of the god Ra (or Osiris or Horus). Ra was considered the highest Egyptian deity, the sun god himself.

Yet despite all his power, this “god” was not able to force the midwives to go contrary to their convictions. In fact, in contrast to the nameless pharaoh, the two midwives are named, Shiphrah and Puah (*Exod. 1:15*); they are highly esteemed because they feared the Lord. Pharaoh’s wicked command had no effect on them because they respected God more than the orders of an earthly ruler (*see also Acts 5:29*). Thus, God blessed them with their own large families. What a powerful testimony to faithfulness. These women, regardless of how little they knew of theology, knew not only what was right but chose to do what was right.

When Pharaoh saw that his plot had failed, he commanded the Egyptians to kill all the male babies born to the Hebrews. They were to throw them into the Nile River, probably as an offering to Hapi, the god of the Nile, and also a god of fertility. (This is the first recorded time that Jews are to be killed only because they are Jews.) The purpose of the death decree was to subdue the Hebrews, to annihilate all male descendants, and to assimilate the women into the Egyptian nation, thus ending the threat that Pharaoh believed the Hebrews posed to his nation.

The midwives not only knew what the right action was to take, but they took it. What’s the obvious message here for us?

Moses Is Born

Read Exodus 2:1–10. What role did God’s providence and protection play in Moses’ birth story?

The historical background of Moses’ birth and life is thrilling because he lived during the time of the famous Egyptian eighteenth dynasty. One king during this dynasty—Thutmose III, called the “Napoleon of Egypt”—is considered one of the most famous pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

Though under a death sentence at birth (see *Exod. 1:22*), Moses was born as a “special” son (*NLT*; Hebrew *tob*, lit. “good”; *Exod. 2:2*). The Hebrew term describes more than external beauty. This word is used, for example, in characterizing God’s work during Creation week, when He declared everything was “good,” even “very good” (*Gen. 1:4, 10, 31*).

As a new creation, this “good” child will, according to God’s plan, become the adult who will lead the Hebrews out of their bondage. At this baby’s birth, especially under such dire circumstances, who could have envisioned his future? Nevertheless, God will fulfill His words to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He covenanted with them that He would give their descendants the Promised Land (*Exod. 2:24, 25*). And, yes, He would use this *tob* infant, decades later, to do just that.

Until then, the Egyptian princess Hatshepsut adopted Moses as her son. The name given to Moses has an Egyptian origin, meaning “son of” or “born of,” as reflected in the names of Ah-mose (“son of Akh”) or Thut-mose (“son of Thoth”). His name is, thus, rendered in Hebrew as *Mosheh*, namely “drawn out.” His life was miraculously spared when he was “drawn out” of the river.

We know only a few things about his early life. After being miraculously saved and adopted by Hatshepsut, Moses lived for his first 12 years with his original family (*Exod. 2:7–9*; Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 244). Moses then received the best Egyptian education, all in order to prepare him to be the next pharaoh of Egypt (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 245). How fascinating that, ultimately, so much of this education would be useless for, or even work against, what really mattered: the knowledge of God and of His truth.

How much are you learning that is ultimately useless for what really matters?

A Change of Plans

Read Exodus 2:11–25. What events quickly transpired to change the entire direction of Moses’ life? What lessons can we learn from this story?

What would Moses do? Would he succumb to the lure of Egypt and to the pleasures of the court, or would he endure hardship with his embattled people? Events soon forced a decision for him.

“When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well” (*Exod. 2:15, NKJV*).

After the killing, Moses really had no choice, at least as far as remaining in Egypt. Thus, whatever plans there were for him to ascend to the throne of Egypt and to become a “god,” those plans were quickly ended. Rather than becoming a false god, Moses would serve the true God instead. No doubt, at the time when he fled, Moses had no idea what the future held for him.

“The whole matter [of Moses’ killing the Egyptian] was quickly made known to the Egyptians, and, greatly exaggerated, soon reached the ears of Pharaoh. It was represented to the king that this act meant much; that Moses designed to lead his people against the Egyptians, to overthrow the government, and to seat himself upon the throne; and that there could be no security for the kingdom while he lived. It was at once determined by the monarch that he should die; but, becoming aware of his danger, he [Moses] made his escape and fled toward Arabia.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 247.

Moses lived 120 years (*Deut. 34:7*), and his life can be divided into three parts of 40 years each. The first 40 years were in Egypt, much of them in the royal palace. The second 40 years he spent in Jethro’s house in the Midian territory.

It’s the last 40 years, however, that take up the bulk of the first five books of Moses (and this quarter), and they tell the story of Israel’s early calling to witness to a world steeped in idolatry, revealing the nature and character of the true God (*see Deut. 4:6–8*).

Was it God’s plan that Moses kill the Egyptian? If not, what does this story teach us about how God can overrule in any situation and use it for His own purposes? How does Romans 8:28 help us understand this important truth?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Moses,” pp. 241–251, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, which will give you significant insights into the studied portion of the biblical text for this week.

The biblical text states that “the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive” (*Exod. 1:17, NKJV*). Ellen G. White aptly comments on the faithfulness of the midwives and the Messianic hope: “Orders were issued to the women whose employment gave them opportunity for executing the command, to destroy the Hebrew male children at their birth. Satan was the mover in this matter. He knew that a deliverer was to be raised up among the Israelites; and by leading the king to destroy their children he hoped to defeat the divine purpose. But the women feared God, and dared not execute the cruel mandate. The Lord approved their course, and prospered them.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 242.

The good news in all this is that, despite Satan’s plans, God overruled, and He used faithful people to thwart the enemy. We do live in the territory of our enemy, whom Jesus called “the prince” or “ruler of this world” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV; John 14:30*). Satan usurped this position from Adam, but Jesus Christ defeated him in His life and through His death on the cross (*Matt. 4:1–11, John 19:30, Heb. 2:14*). Although Satan is still alive and active, as revealed in his attempt to kill those children, his own execution is certain (*John 12:31; John 16:11; Rev. 20:9, 10, 14*). The good news is that life’s difficulties can be overcome by God’s grace (*Phil. 4:13*). That grace is our only hope.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Why did God allow the Hebrews to live in Egypt and be oppressed? Why did it take so long for God to intervene on their behalf? Remember, too, that each person suffered only as long as the person lived. That is, the time of suffering for the nation was long, but each person suffered only as long as that single person lived. Why is making that distinction important in seeking to understand human suffering in general?
- ② Dwell more on the questions regarding how God was able to use Moses’ hotheaded act of killing the Egyptian. Suppose he hadn’t done it? Would that have meant the Hebrews would not have eventually escaped from Egypt? Explain your reasoning.

No Rats for Lunch

By ANDREW McCHESENEY

Peter Siamikobo enjoyed digging for rats in a mountainous village in Zambia. The boy and his family ate the rodents with maize-meal porridge at mealtimes. They also enjoyed eating pigs and bubble fish. Pork was always on the table at Christmas. Bubble fish was popular for its boneless meat.

So, it came as a surprise to Peter when he learned that the Bible prohibited his favorite meats.

He heard about unclean food for the first time when he traveled about 20 miles from his hometown to visit a brother who was working at a farm operated by Seventh-day Adventist missionaries from the United States. He stayed for Sabbath worship services, and the preacher spoke about the clean and unclean animals of Leviticus 11. Peter realized that he and his family were following a meal plan that didn't match the Bible's teaching.

After a while, the missionaries began to hold worship services in Peter's elementary school on Sabbath afternoons. Peter attended the meetings, even though he had to walk two miles to reach the school.

His parents, however, discouraged him from going and reminded him that he had been baptized as a baby. Father even ordered him to work on the family farm on Saturdays. Peter didn't know anything about Sabbath observance, and he quickly did his work in the morning so he got to the afternoon meeting.

In high school, Peter made new friends from Adventist families. He studied the Bible with them and gave his heart to Jesus in baptism by immersion. He stopped eating rats, pork, and bubble fish.

Over time, his parents grew to appreciate the seventh-day Sabbath. They understood why he didn't eat unclean meat. Every Sabbath that he was at home, they encouraged him not to be late for Sabbath School.

Today, there is an Adventist church in Peter's town. Through the Adventist influence, many townspeople have stopped eating unclean food.

Peter is grateful that he learned as a boy about the importance of healthy living and glorifying God with his diet. After all, 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (NKJV).

"Thank Jesus for saving me from unclean food," said Peter, a church elder and head of the Social Sciences Department at Rusangu Secondary School, a Seventh-day Adventist high school, in Zambia.

Pray for the gospel to be proclaimed in Zambia and other countries in the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, the recipient of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering.