

# Exodus – Lesson 3

## Israel Oppressed in Egypt

### Read Exodus 1:8-22

1. (a) For what reason(s) does the “*new king*” decide to enslave the Hebrews?

According to verses 9-10, the king enslaves the people because he is afraid of their power in numbers. Specifically, he is concerned that the Hebrews will side with another nation if/when Egypt should come up against a nation in war. Historically, we know that Ahmose I (the likely pharaoh of these verses) was a militaristic king and that Egypt entered a period of great military expansion during the XVIII Dynasty. Ahmose probably recognized, shrewdly, that the Hebrews could make any real expansion of the kingdom difficult if they failed to join Egypt in their endeavors. A second reason, although less likely, is that Ahmose believed that the Hebrews could be *forced* to participate on the side of Egypt in any future campaigns, and subscribed them into slavery as a first step towards making them a part of the Egyptian army. However, the language of verses 9 and 10 seems to suggest a less *proactive* approach and more of a fear on his part.

(b) What does it mean in 1:10, “*let us deal shrewdly with them?*” How did the Egyptians think they could *control* the Israelites, at least at the beginning?

It would appear that the Egyptians, at first, thought they could “bargain” with the Israelites in some way. Maybe this “shrewdness” was an attempt, at least at first, to make the Hebrews see how valuable they were in the empire, and thus they would *want* to join the Egyptians in their conquests. The first actions may have been an attempt to “use” the Hebrews as part of the larger plans of Egypt and, when that failed, the Egyptians were forced to use more punitive measures to get what they wanted.

(c) From 1:10-11, what did this new king seem to be *fascinated* with? What is a “*store city?*”

The enslavement of the Hebrews to build “*store cities*” seems to indicate that Ahmose was dedicated to the *financial* expansion of his empire through the conquest of other peoples and the taking of their resources (i.e. gold and silver, food-stuffs, and other precious items). A “*store city*” is a place where this ill-gotten booty could be stored for later use, or just to have and brag about. A similar situation takes place under Solomon (see 2 Chronicles 8:4) who also built cities for the purpose of storing wealth.

(d) How can this be connected with the *prophecy* of Genesis 15:14?

In that prophecy, God tells Abraham that the Hebrews would leave their enslavement with much “*plunder.*” Thus, when the Hebrews departed, they took with them much of this wealth (see Exodus 12:35-36). To say that the Hebrews “*plundered*” the Egyptians as they left is somewhat ironic: having built the store cities for the pharaoh, the Hebrews now take with them the very resources that were stored there and collected by the military campaigns of Egypt against other nations. It is also ironic that the Hebrews came to Egypt with nothing, but left with great wealth, even though they had been nothing more than slaves in Egypt. God had given them, as they left, enough financial resources to begin as a new nation in Canaan – they would not need to plunder other nations in the Conquest, a lesson that Saul (the first king) didn’t seem to learn (see 1 Samuel 15:9).

2. What happens when the Egyptians *oppress* the Israelites in the land? How is this *predictable* (given the prophecy given to Abraham)?

The more the Egyptians oppress the Hebrews, the more the Hebrews multiply and expand. The attempt by the pharaoh to *force* the Hebrews into submission backfires upon him: when he enslaves them to hard labor, they simply grow in number. This is utterly predictable, given what we know from the prophecy given to Abraham: as a part of God's plan to grow this people into a vast nation, he uses the oppression of the Egyptians as a part of this plan. In other words, the message given to Abraham was that his descendants would be oppressed in Egypt, but this was *precisely* what the Lord wanted, for it would be a terrific way to cause the people to do nothing more than expand in number.

3. (a) What was the *decree* of Pharaoh in 1:16 and 1:22? How was it to be *carried out*?

Pharaoh decreed that every male child born to the Hebrews was to be killed. It was to be carried out by the mid-wives, who were commanded to kill any child they were helping to birth who was male.

- (b) Why did Pharaoh *decree* this thing? What did he believe would *happen* to the Israelites?

Having the male children killed would "weaken" the Hebrew people by reducing the number of males in the population and it would slow the overall growth of the people. The pharaoh knew that this decree, within a few generations, would reduce the male population significantly and make the Hebrews more "female" in orientation, thus lessening the possibility that the Hebrews would rise up as a military force. The decree would also break the Hebrews psychologically: by killing off the males at birth, the various family lineages would come to an end and the people would no longer be able to divide themselves by clan. It would also force the Hebrew women who remained to look for non-Hebrew men to marry, thus melding the Hebrews into the other nations who had been conquered and brought to Egypt.

4. (a) Why did the midwives *disobey* the command of the Pharaoh?

The midwives disobeyed because, according to 1:17, they "*feared*" God. They weighed the consequences of disobeying the pharaoh over against disobeying God, and decided that disobeying God would produce greater consequences than disobeying the pharaoh. Such action was risky, given the power of the pharaoh. Even though the people had "lost" some of their knowledge of God and were no longer in direct, intimate contact with God, the midwives still retained the knowledge that God (whoever He was) had more power as their Creator than pharaoh did as their king.

- (b) List several aspects of what it means to "*fear God*" (see Ps. 111:10, Prov. 9:10, Job 1:9, 1 Peter 2:17, Rev. 14:7).

To fear God means 1) to be wise (i.e. the "*beginning of wisdom*"; Psalm 111:10, Prov. 9:10), to be able to access knowledge and put that knowledge into action. To fear God, in this context, is to recognize that there is a God, that he is the Creator, *and* to submit oneself to his authority as the Creator. To fear God also means 2) to trust in God as *the* source of life and happiness and purpose and to remain faithful to him regardless of the circumstances (Job 1:9). To fear God also means 3) to be afraid of God in the sense of recognizing his power to judge and to destroy. The fear of God must also include a realization of the *position* of God as ruler and to believe that he can destroy what he has formed, including those who violate his righteous standards (Rev. 14:7).

5. (a) How can it be explained that God “approved” of the *excuse* these midwives used (see v. 20)?

First, there is nothing in the text to suggest that the midwives lied to the pharaoh; it is possible that God had caused the circumstances of male births to be just as the midwives said it was, thus making the midwives truthful. However, based on the statement in v. 17, it is more likely that the midwives did “fudge” the truth a bit here, and lied to pharaoh in order to obey God without consequence from the king. After all, the pharaoh seems to have “bought” the story and *changed his decree* to bypass the midwives (if they were telling the truth). Although God did not *cause* the midwives to lie, he did not condemn their actions primarily because such action was consistent with a fear of God over a fear of others. In other words, the motives of the midwives was to fear God and the decree of the pharaoh was unjust. Because of the unjustness of the decree, God accepted the lie of the midwives as being *more* just than the unjust nature of what would have happened had the midwives obeyed the decree.

- (b) List some other *examples* from Scripture where God “uses” the sin of a person to further His ends.

The sin of Adam was used by God to fulfill his purpose of redeeming the creation through Jesus Christ. The sin of Pilate was used by God to fulfill his purpose of crucifying his own Son. The sin of Judas was used by God in the same way. The sin of Saul to persecute the church was used by God to force it out of Jerusalem and Judea to the “*uttermost parts of the earth*” and to prepare Paul for his life of service to Jesus Christ upon his conversion.

- (c) Why does this not permit us to excuse *our* sinfulness (see Romans 6)?

Although it is true that God does use the sin of people to further his end, the *consequences and judgment* that come from those acts are still upon those who commit them. Just because God uses, in his sovereign plan, the sin of human beings to further his goals, this does not relieve us of the responsibility of such decisions to act sinfully. And, according to Romans 6:17, those who have been regenerated by the Spirit of God and have been converted to faith in Jesus Christ are now able, by the power of the indwelling Spirit, to live a life of righteousness, and they have a new nature that is inclined to do so. Truly regenerated persons will never ask the question about furthering God’s ends by sin because they *know* that the Christian life is about righteousness and sanctification; they recognize that the old life was one of slavery to sin (see Romans 6:20ff) which must never be allowed to return.