

BEHIND A FROWNING PROVIDENCE

– EXODUS 1:1-14. – *MAY 19.* –

Golden Text: – "Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distress." – Psa. 107:13.

OUR present lesson treats of the virtual enslavement of the nation of Israel and their tribulations connected therewith. Our preceding lesson showed Joseph the governor of all Egypt, and the coming of his father Jacob and his entire household to live in the land of Goshen, a portion of Egypt well suited to herdsman. This, we are informed, was with the full knowledge and consent of the reigning monarch. The entire family of Jacob, surnamed Israel, at this time consisted of seventy souls, persons, but since these are all said to have come out of the loins of Jacob, we are to understand that the actual number exceeded seventy perhaps considerably, the additional persons being probably wives and servants.

The record (v. 6) that Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation, seems to cover a lapse of considerable time, since Joseph himself lived seventy-three years after the coming of his father and brethren to dwell in Egypt, and apparently until his death Joseph was the governor – next to the king. Meantime the Israelites under special divine providence multiplied greatly. The number of adjectives used to express this increase intimates that the writer recognized the multiplication as abnormal, miraculous. He declares (1) they were "fruitful," that is prolific; (2) they "increased abundantly"; (3) they "multiplied"; (4) "waxed exceedingly mighty"; (5) "the land [Goshen] was filled with them."

ANOTHER KING WHO KNEW NOT JOSEPH

From the time Jacob entered Egypt until the exodus was two hundred and fifteen years, and the wonderful increase is shown by the statement of Numbers 1:45,46 that the Israelites, exclusive of the tribe of Levi, numbered 603,550 of twenty years old and upward, capable of military duty. These figures imply a total number, including women and children, of some two or three million persons. This was at a time when there arose a new king which knew not Joseph. Excavations made in Egypt show that it was about this time that the government of Egypt was revolutionized. In Joseph's time, and for quite a while before, it had been governed by what were known as the Hyksos or shepherd kings – supposed to have been invaders and not of pure Egyptian stock. The revolution brought in a change of dynasty, supposed to have been commenced with Rameses I. It is quite generally claimed amongst scholars that Rameses II. was the Pharaoh who specially harried the Israelites in the endeavor to prevent their increase in numbers and influence, and his son Menephtah I. is supposed to have been the Pharaoh reigning at the time of the exodus of the Israelites.

The change of dynasty brought the change of ambitions and methods, and Rameses II. is credited with having been the most wonderful builder of great edifices of his time. It is doubtless in connection with these expensive public improvements that the Israelites were so rigorously treated. The method employed was not that of chattel slavery, as was practised in the United States and elsewhere until recently, but a slavery of a different kind: Solomon similarly oppressed the Israelites, though not with the same degree of severity and rigor, in conjunction with the building of his palace, the public roads, Temple, etc. The method was to demand a certain percentage of the younger, stronger, vigorous males to serve without pay and on very scanty rations in the work on the public buildings, cities, etc. The same method

is today employed in some parts of Africa, particularly by the Portuguese, who taking possession of certain portions of the dark continent, demand a certain amount of service from the natives, who are marched off in bands as slaves and hired out for a period of time to the gold and diamond industries without pay except the plainest food. The sum paid by the miners to the Portuguese government for the use of these poor creatures is credited up as taxes for defraying the expenses of their oppressors.

ISRAEL PERSECUTED YET PROSPERED

King Rameses II. was evidently a very ambitious man who feared and prepared for wars with his neighbors, to the north and east especially. Hence he built fortified cities, "store cities," where food and implements, chariots, etc., were held in readiness for use on emergency for repelling foes expected from that quarter. The land of Goshen, inhabited by the Israelites, was in the same general direction, and this presented a double cause for fear. The Israelites held aloof from the Egyptians, not intermarrying or otherwise amalgamating. They were animated by certain hopes of their own future greatness, of which, no doubt, they sometimes boasted. What should be done with this people? was the query of Rameses II. Although the Egyptians were more numerous, the king is represented as saying, "They be **[R3983 : page 126]** mightier than we." Dwelling largely with their flocks and herds in the open air they were probably a stronger, more rugged race than the Egyptians. Even to the present time the natural seed of Abraham seem to have the Lord's blessing upon them physically in good degree. The king did not meditate driving the Israelites out of Goshen – no! that might prove a troublesome and expensive operation. Besides, he was shrewd enough to realize that if he could use that people as his slaves they would do much for the enrichment of the Egyptians by furnishing labor at the mere nominal cost of the commonest sustenance.

The first step was to take the most rugged from their homes and families for service in the Egyptian public works under taskmasters who were directed to work them so hard as to make their lives burdensome – to wear them out or drive them to suicide. In Central Africa quite a great many of the natives impressed into public service after this manner have been known to commit suicide rather than continue their toil unrewarded. But the increase of the Israelites continued more and more, and Rameses II., fearful of trouble with them, commanded the midwives to murder all the male children at birth. Not succeeding in this, he displayed far more cruelty than the notorious Herod, who slaughtered the babes of Bethlehem, for Rameses II. commanded every parent to slaughter his own male children, and held responsible all who failed so to do. It was under these trying conditions, we remember, that Moses was born, and it was this rigorous law that prevented his parents from rearing him at home, as their own lives would [R3983 : page 127] have paid the penalty of the preservation of his. Apparently, in spite of everything that the king did, the Israelites flourished, and this persecution, we remember, continued until Moses was eighty years of age, and as God's representative delivered the people.

CORROBORATIONS OF THE BIBLE NARRATIVE

In confirmation of the Bible record, in recent times the ruins of the city of Pithom has been discovered and it corresponds exactly to what should be expected. It evidently was a large warehouse, and apparently its only openings were at the top. Scholars describe the city thus: –

"Pithom was discovered in 1883-4 by M. Naville, near the Suez canal, and about twelve miles west of Ismalia. The town is altogether square, enclosed by a great wall 22 feet high and measuring 600 feet around each side. The area contained within the wall is estimated at about ten acres. Nearly the whole of its

space is occupied by solidly built square chambers divided one from the other by brick walls from eight to ten feet thick unpierced by window or door or opening of any kind. The access to these chambers was from the top. Granite statues were found representing Rameses II. Amongst the inscriptions occurred the name of the city, Pi-Tum (Pithum) meaning 'the house of Tum,' the Egyptian god of the setting sun. An unfinished temple of Tum was also found. Specimens of the brick can be found in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. They are usually four to eight inches square and one and a half to two inches thick, unbaked, but very hard. An especial confirmation of the Bible story, and proof that this is one of the very cities that the Hebrews built, is the fact that the lower courses of these walls and for some distance up are of well-made brick with chopped straw in them; but higher up the courses of brick are not so good, the straw is long and scanty, and the last courses have no straw at all, but have sedges, rushes and water plants baked in the mud." – Exodus 5:6-18.

THE VALUE OF THESE EXPERIENCES

Whoever regards these experiences of Abraham's posterity as amongst the ordinary vicissitudes of life to which all mankind are subject, makes a mistake. To rightly understand the history of Israel we must remember that the divine purposes as represented in the Oath-Bound Covenant made with Abraham were behind and intermingled with all of Israel's experiences. And more than this, the natural seed of Abraham were to furnish a type, illustration, picture, of the experiences of Spiritual Israel on a higher plane. Looking first at the effect of the bondage and tribulation upon natural Israel we can readily surmise that they served to make that people of much stronger character than they otherwise would have been. To be a subject race would undoubtedly help to develop, in many at least, a humility of mind

which was markedly illustrated in the person of Moses, who is declared to have been the meekest man in all the earth.

Furthermore, their tribulations would tend to bind them in sympathy more closely together as one nation, one people. Additionally their rigorous treatment as slaves would impress upon them more than ever their Abrahamic heritage in the promise of the Lord that they should be a great people and ultimately be used of him in the blessing of all the nations of the earth. This properly enough led them, as we read, to cry unto the Lord in their sore distress. Who can estimate the value of these lessons given to this nation at the very beginning of its existence – a nation from which the Lord designed to develop some of his chosen servants, amongst whom would be the Messiah himself and his chosen apostles, the foundation of the new dispensation, Spiritual Israel. Well has the poet said that behind a frowning providence God hides a smiling face. The Israelites had an experience of this kind: for a time divine favor was hidden from them, but the Lord was merely waiting for the appropriate time to be gracious to them, in a time and in a manner that would be most favorable to them and most in accord with his own arrangements for the blessing of themselves and all mankind.

The Psalmist in the Golden Text touched the vital point of Israel's experiences. Before being used of the Lord and prepared for further great things at his hand Israel needed to learn dependence upon him. And not only they but all of us have learned that trouble is a great teacher: that it appeals to the heart far more than does prosperity; that it points us to the Lord as the great care-taker. The Prophet has declared that before he was afflicted he went astray; and similarly Israel evidently would have been far more astray if deprived of the tribulations which led them to call on the Lord, and which brought to them his deliverance out of their distresses at the hands of Moses, the mediator of the Law Covenant.

LESSONS FOR SPIRITUAL ISRAELITES

Very similar are the lessons which the Spiritual Israelites are day by day receiving individually in the great school of experience. How often does the Lord allow Egypt, the world, to oppress those who are his. This oppression sometimes comes along financial lines and sometimes socially. It is sometimes severest in the home, at other times in the shop. The great oppressor typified by Pharaoh is Satan. He is the great taskmaster. To what an extent he has gained a power over the flesh of those who are trusting in the Lord along for deliverance! And who will doubt that the great Adversary's special attacks are not upon the world and the wicked, but upon those who are the Lord's peculiar people, upon those who are his jewels, who have made a covenant with him by sacrifice, and whose deliverance at the hands of the antitypical Moses, Christ, he has promised. Harken to the Master's words, which assure us that in all of our tribulations we may reckon on his sympathy and loving interest and his power to make all things work together for our good. Let us give attention, too, to the prayer he taught us, "Abandon us not in temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." And again the Apostle's assurance that he will not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able, but with every temptation will provide a way of escape.

As the effect of Israel's tribulation was to turn their hearts toward the Lord and to lead them to cry out for his promised assistance, so all of our trying experiences with the world, the flesh and the Adversary and the bondage of sin and death – all these appeal to the New Creatures in Christ who have the Father's promise. All this leads us more and more to look unto the Lord from whom cometh our help, and to wait for his Son from heaven, and to expect the deliverance of the groaning creation at his second advent. Is it not true, then, that present distresses and tribulations are all working out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, if we are rightly exercised thereby? And

if as true Israelites we have confidence in the Abrahamic promise, we have it, as the Apostle describes, as an anchor to our souls both sure and steadfast, entering into that which is beyond the veil, whither our forerunner is entered for us – and made atonement for us – and from whence he provides us the blessed deliverance which we hope soon to experience in the resurrection change, when in a moment, the twinkling of an eye, we shall be made like him, see him as he is and share his glory.
