

Exodus 1:8-14

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Many years before the birth of Moses, the Egyptians got concerned with the Israelites flourishing in their land. They decided to oppress the Israelites with hard labor.

In an effort to reduce the number of Israelites and as a result reduce the threat, the Egyptians decided to oppress the Israelites with hard labor in an effort to discourage them from multiplying. Just the opposite resulted, so they increased the severity of the work they forced them to do.

The preparation for the deliverance of the Israelites begins with the mention of an unnamed Pharaoh *who did not know Joseph*. This probably does not mean that he had never heard of Joseph, but that he did not attach any significance or favor to Joseph. Up to this point, the Israelites enjoyed relative peace and prosperity in light of what Joseph did years earlier. With this Pharaoh, things were about to change.

The pharaoh voiced his concerns about the number and influence of the Israelites and he consulted with *his people* (“people” here probably refers to his close advisors). He pointed out two worrisome things about the *sons of Israel* – that they were *more and mightier than* the Egyptians. The Pharaoh recognizes that the Israelites had grown greatly in number (from 70 to probably over 1.5 million) and as a result had become powerful within Egyptian society and culture.

He gathered his advisors to seek to *deal wisely with* the Israelites. Apparently, he wanted to come up with an effective, workable solution that would *deal wisely with them* because he was concerned that the Israelites would *join themselves* to an alliance of Egypt’s enemies (*to those who hate us*) and would wage war against the pharaoh. Then perhaps in the chaos they would *depart from the land*, depriving Egypt of a great source of labor and prosperity.

The decision they came up with is they *appointed taskmasters over them* (literally “rulers of forced laborers”). The job of these *taskmasters* was to *afflict them with hard labor*. Evidently, they thought that making the Israelites’

lives miserable with hard labor would discourage them from bringing children into such a harsh world.

The result of the oppressive labor is that *they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses*. These cities (on the east side of the Nile River delta in northeast Egypt) were used to store grain and other necessities for the Egyptians. Building these cities probably took perhaps as many as twenty years to complete. So these cities were built several years before the birth of Moses ([Exodus 2](#)).

The plan to prevent the Israelites from multiplying did not work. In fact, just the opposite occurred – *the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out*. So, instead of removing the Egyptian leadership's fear, the opposite occurred – *they were in dread of the sons of Israel*. Their fear turned to dread.

Was this oppression part of the plan of God? Yes. In fact, it was declared by God hundreds of earlier to Abraham ([Genesis 15](#)). While God clearly does not feel compelled to justify Himself to us as to why He allowed this suffering, it clearly was a part of God's plan, and it shows that oppression and opposition cannot prevent God from blessing His covenant people. It is also meant to show Israel that their survival and thriving is the work of God, not their own. It arguably led to the greatest blessing of all for Israel, their deliverance from slavery.

Instead of immediately moving on from a plan that obviously failed, *the Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously*. It seems that, in their minds, there was not enough oppression to prevent the Israelites from multiplying, so they made it even worse for them. In fact, *they made their lives bitter with hard labor*. They were to labor *in mortar and bricks and at all kinds of labor in the field*, implying that they were given the worst jobs possible when doing construction, resulting in *all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them*. In other words, there was no restriction on what kind of labor the Israelites were tasked with or on the severity of the work.

This was obviously designed to make the lives of the Israelites so miserable that they were either unable or unwilling to have more children. But the increased severity of the labor did not work, because the Egyptians had to come up with another plan to reduce the number of Israelites.

Biblical Text:

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land.” ¹¹So they appointed taskmasters over them to afflict them with hard labor. And they built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹²But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread out, so that they were in dread of the sons of Israel. ¹³The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously; ¹⁴and they made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and bricks and at all *kinds* of labor in the field, all their labors which they rigorously imposed on them.