



a new king, which knew not Joseph

Exodus 1.⁸

Until God personally took upon him a tabernacle of clay and dwelt among men in hopes of revealing the full nature of his incomparable character, no Biblical revelation was more illuminating as to the character of God than that found in Israel's deliverance from a painful Egyptian oppression. The entire Old Testament revolves around the rescue of immigrants, enslaved by the Egyptian Empire. Jesus' revelation of God as recorded in the New Testament is founded on that great rescue, with Jesus reenacting that great Old Testament revelation of God as emancipator.

Today, we look again at the story of Israel's deliverance from servitude—a story so well known that its meaning is often lost in familiarity. We will find much that is familiar in our own day—perhaps uncomfortably so.

After a brief survey of immigrant peoples,¹ who had entered Egypt several generations earlier, and after informing us that this immigrant group was “fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty,”² the writers of Exodus inform us that “there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.”³

¹ The text calls them “Israel,” though this is not entirely accurate. According to Exodus 12.³⁸, those who were rescued were a “mixed multitude.” This notice is confirmed by the onomastic evidence, which indicates that the group was constituted of several diverse “ethnic” groups. This designation, “Israel,” may hide as much as it reveals. It may have been as advantageous in the ancient world as in the modern to conveniently ignore the groups' immigrant status.

² Exodus 1.⁷

³ Exodus 1.⁸

We will want to stop here and review who Joseph was, and what it may have meant that Pharaoh “knew not Joseph.”

Joseph was a highly successful and productive immigrant. In fact, he was politically instrumental in establishing policies that helped his adopted Egyptian nation through a period of very difficult economic challenges. Through his political influence, foreigners who suffered under the dangers of drought were granted refugee status in Egypt. Here, in their adopted homeland, these refugees flourished. After a lifetime of service to the Egyptian state, Joseph died. With time, he was forgotten.

What, exactly, do we mean by “forgotten”? What are we to understand from the notice that the new king “knew not Joseph”? Does this mean, simply, that the new king never personally met or knew the man, Joseph? Based on what follows, this seems unlikely that this is how we are to understand the notice. Does it mean that he was unfamiliar with all that Joseph had done for the nation? Again, this does not seem likely. Does it mean that the new king knew of Joseph’s political accomplishments, but chose to ignore and even diminish their importance? Why would he do so? Does it mean that the new king chose to ignore or even deny Joseph’s immigrant status? Does it mean that the new king could not bring himself to acknowledge the important and dynamic contributions of this non-Egyptian immigrant?

However we think of Pharaoh’s not knowing Joseph, it seems best to see Pharaoh’s not knowing as a rejection of the man, his immigrant confederates, and their dynamic contributions of Egyptian society. This is clear from the new king’s subsequent policies and actions. His not “knowing” Joseph is something more than “personal.” It is ethnic. Pharaoh, it seems, is what we would today call a “racist,” a “bigot,” a “xenophobe,” a “nationalist.” For this reason, the new Pharaoh chose to ignore and deny Joseph’s significant contributions as an immigrant. To acknowledge such contributions would undermine the new Pharaoh’s program.

What was that program? Intimidation. Genocide. Slavery. Oppression. Pogrom.

Pharaoh instituted a new policy concerning foreigners. We might call it a “zero tolerance” policy.

“Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we:
Come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply...Therefore they did set over them
taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens.”

So it was that Pharaoh afflicted the immigrants—vulnerable, in large part, because of their lack of legal standing and protections—enslaving them and making “their lives bitter.” The immigrants were put to work building “for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses. A “treasure city” is a domestic fortified site that serves to protect food stuffs, military equipment, or royal treasuries. The construction and upkeep of such cities is often reflective of economic booms, with their attendant luxurious excess of goods and “investment potentials.”

This notice concerning the building project to which the immigrants were put to work is a reminder that the oppression of foreigners and other extralegal populations is often motivated by economic concerns. Certainly, in the United States, the most virulent periods of xenophobia have been during times of economic inequality, and have served to maintain a privileged population’s prerogatives.

But, the physical oppression of slavery did not go far enough toward accomplishing Pharaoh’s programmatic ends. He was not simply building up a slave labor force in order to build a few cities. He was intent on putting an end to the influence and even existence of the threatening immigrant population in his nation. Therefore, he developed a policy of separating children, male children anyway, from their parents. This took the form of infanticide.

“When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women... if it be a son, then ye shall kill him”⁴

With the death of this ignorantly arrogant Pharaoh, and the instalment of a new ruler, the oppression continued. It had hardened into a multi-generational pogrom. This world superpower assumed it was safe in carrying out its extreme policies. Who would or could oppose it?

⁴ Exodus 1.¹⁶

It would find out soon enough. There was a truly Super Power more than capable of resisting Egypt's national hubris.

“And the LORD said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.... Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.’”⁵

And, as all know, deliver them He did. After nine “plagues”—calls to repentance, really—the superpower's leader remained stubbornly unrepentant. Why should he repent? He hadn't done anything wrong. Simply worked to make his nation great again. But with the tenth and final plague, the law of restoration finally caught up with him and his complicit citizenry. As the nation had carried out the separation of immigrant parents from their male children, so now he and his people were separated from their firstborn sons.

“And it came to pass, that at midnight the LORD smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he, and all his servants, and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead.”⁶

Sadly, but irrevocably, what goes around, comes around.

Well, the rest is history, as they say. The immigrant slaves were freed. Yahweh won the final battle against the superpower's world-class military machine. But there is another chapter to the story that must be told.

Yahweh took this disparate pack of ex-slaves out into the forbidding desert, where they would have to learn to rely upon him alone for their survival. In this wilderness, he came down and met

⁵ Exodus 3.⁷⁻⁹

⁶ Exodus 12.²⁹⁻³⁰

with them at Sinai. He delivered just laws with which individuals and society were to bind themselves. Over and over, he reminded them that their privilege and responsibility to form a just society was based upon their previous experience as oppressed immigrants. They must never forget where they came from. They must consider their experience in all they did.

“But the LORD hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day.”

“And because he loved thy fathers [the enslaved immigrants], therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt...”

“I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before me.”

“And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.”

“Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”

“And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, ‘What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD our God hath commanded you?’ Then thou shalt say unto thy son, ‘We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...’”⁷

Well, we could go on, but you see the emphasis. However, we should mention one other obligation that their slavery and deliverance brought upon them. This new nation, formed from disparate groups, was never to return to Egypt by establishing Egypt-like public policy or engaging in Egypt-like behavior toward immigrants. They were not to treat immigrants as they had been treated.

⁷ Deuteronomy 4.²⁰; 4.³⁷; 5.⁶⁻⁷; 5.¹⁵; 6.¹²; 6.²⁰⁻²¹

“The LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: he doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and *loveth the stranger*, in giving him food and raiment. *Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.*”⁸

“Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁹

“Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”¹⁰

“And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”¹¹

“Ye shall have one manner of law, as well for the stranger, as for one of your own country: for I am the LORD your God.”¹²

“And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee.”¹³

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of individuals and nations remembering that, “there, but for the grace of God, go I, we.”

Unless one is Native American, there is not a single American who does not descend from immigrants. Most of those immigrants were not invited here. They came here, mostly, illegally, violently, and against the will of those who possessed the land before them.

⁸ Deuteronomy 10.¹⁷⁻¹⁹; emphasis added.

⁹ Exodus 22.²¹

¹⁰ Exodus. 23.⁹

¹¹ Leviticus. 19.³³⁻³⁴

¹² Leviticus 24.²²

¹³ Leviticus 25.³⁵

Nevertheless, the United States government, led by a man who would pervert the spirit of our nation, has chosen to act the part of Egyptian oppressor toward immigrants and refugees. He and his abhorrent administration assume, as Pharaoh and Egypt did, that they can treat the immigrants and refugees at its border in any inhumane way they choose. The man who would be king assumes it is safe. The “infestation,” he believes, is powerless to resist its poisonous policies. He and his disciples assume there will be no ill consequences for their vile behavior. Rather, they seem to believe, against every holy principle, that such vile behavior will, somehow, make America great again.

But, like ancient Egypt, the man and his complicit followers have rebelliously, willfully forgotten that there is a stronger superpower. There is a God in heaven. He is the same today as he was yesterday. He is a liberator of the oppressed. This is at the very heart of His character. If he must, in order to liberate the oppressed, he will humiliate and put an end to the stubbornly impertinent and impenitent oppressor nation. That nation, that calls itself “blessed,” will discover that God has not forgotten how to curse.