The Israelites Oppressed

As I write these notes, the ceasefire in the Middle East appears to holding although any peace in this region is always fragile. As with many conflicts, this one involves a dispute over land ownership. The creation of the nation state of Israel after WW2 set in motion a series of armed confrontations between Jews and Arabs resulting in a shifting regional map. After the horrors of WW2 and most particularly the Holocaust, the Israelites were anxious to have a country of their own and a United Nations resolution in 1948 provided that opportunity although the war had decimated their numbers. Jews from across the world assembled to return to Canaan, an account portrayed in the novel “Exodus”.

We now begin our study of the second book of the Bible, Exodus which means departure. The author of this book was Moses who wrote the first 5 books of the Bible. Due to the disobedience of the Israelites, there is no arrival in this book so it is appropriately named Exodus. The chapter begins with a listing of the sons of Jacob who settled in Egypt and we see that even after the death of Jacob’s 12 sons, the family stayed in Egypt despite God’s promise of Canaan as an inheritance. In Genesis chapter 47 we saw that Jacob’s family was fruitful in Egypt making it harder to leave. We can sometimes be victims of inertia, finding it easier to settle into our circumstances rather than putting forth the effort to make a change. The law of inertia states that an object resists a change in motion unless it is acted on by an external force. God had used a famine to force Jacob and his family to leave Canaan and God used slavery to force them back to Canaan. The chapter quickly moves to a period when a new king ascends to the throne in Egypt and turns the people against the Israelites. While it appears to be a quick transition, 400 years elapsed between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus (see Gen. 15:13-16). We know very little about what occurred during this period except that the children of Israel were fruitful and multiplied abundantly. Similar to the period between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament, God is silent for about 400 years. This of course does not mean that he is inactive. He was busy accomplishing his will during both of those periods after which he used a deliverer to free his people from bondage. Moses led his people to freedom from physical slavery and Jesus led his people to freedom from spiritual slavery.

Bob Deffinbaugh wrote about the new king in Egypt theorizing that the king was of the Hyksos monarchy which ruled Egypt from about 1700 to 1550 BC. The Hyksos were from Asia and would not have been familiar with how Joseph had saved the country from famine generations before. The king was concerned that the Israelites were so prolific that they would overwhelm the country. He also saw the danger of having them join forces with an invading army then leaving. It seems that he was afraid they would stay and afraid they would go. He wanted Egypt to enjoy the fruits of their labor without the risks. His solution was to enslave them, a plan readily agreed to by the Egyptian people. They may have harbored resentment toward the descendants of Jacob because they had flourished during the time of famine while the Egyptians lost much of their wealth (see Gen. 47:25-27). Verses 13 and 14 say the Egyptians treated the Israelites ruthlessly, however this treatment did not compare to the barbarity of the king who ordered midwives to kill Hebrew boys at birth. Cowardly despots often employ others to do their dirty work but fortunately the midwives would not be parties to such a heinous crime telling Pharaoh the Hebrew women gave birth before they arrived. David Guzik wrote *“Though generally we are called to obey the government and honor civic rulers (Romans 13:1-5), we are never called to put government in the place of God. Therefore if the government tells us to do something against God's will, we are to obey God first.”* For their actions, God rewarded the midwives by recording their names in the Bible for posterity. Pharaoh then enlisted the aid of his citizens telling them to throw Hebrew boys into the Nile River. Pharaoh was an agent of Satan as was Herod who centuries later ordered the killing of all Jewish boys aged two and under hoping to prevent Jesus from taking his throne (see Matt. 2:16, see also Gen 3:15).

In its roughly 4000 year existence, Israel has waxed and waned. God sent them to Egypt because they were not strong enough to take over Canaan. When they had grown to a nation of 2 million, God sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt, however due to their refusal to obey God, their numbers were reduced during their 40 year sojourn in the desert. It is ironic that only after their population was diminished during WW2 that they were once again ready to occupy Canaan. Some speculate that those who survived the concentration camps were the strongest and most prepared to withstand the rigors of fighting multiple Arab countries to establish the nation of Israel. Like others before him, Hitler was an agent of Satan but God was able to create something positive from one of the most despicable acts in history.