

13. Defining Bondage as a Descent Phase (Exodus 1–6)

When the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob multiplied into a numerous people in Egypt, a new Pharaoh arose who feared them and therefore subjected them to hard bondage. God's covenant with their ancestors to preserve their descendants, however, required God to deliver the people of Israel for their ancestors' sake. Just how God delivered them from bondage established a scriptural pattern we find in other accounts as well. It is a pattern that repeats itself at the end of the world.

Throughout his intervention in human history, God tests the loyalties of his children, not only toward himself but also toward each other. While some, like Egypt's Pharaoh, betray and cruelly oppress people, others like Moses demonstrate extraordinary loyalty toward God and toward their peoples. Isaiah's end-time scenario provides a similar setting for God to test his children's loyalties. As God works through human agents to bring about the end-time restoration of his covenant people, some rise to the occasion on the model of Moses while others follow Pharaoh's example of laboring, just as intensely, to try to thwart and defeat God's plan.

Observe the Book of Exodus' sequence of events as the Israelites' slavery had the effect of turning their hearts toward God: "The Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor: And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigor" (Exodus 1:13–14); "The children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them" (Exodus 2:23–25);

"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, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:7–8); "And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: And Aaron spake all the words which the Lord had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped" (Exodus 4:29–31).

The Israelites' descent phase into sorrows and afflictions set the stage for their deliverance or ascent phase. Called the "Birthpangs of the Messiah," that descent phase of God's testing and refining his people occasioned the rise of a deliverer—Moses—who led them out of bondage to freedom and rebirth as a new, covenant nation of God's people.

"And the Lord said unto Moses . . . I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered my covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched-out

arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for a heritage” (Exodus 6:1, 5–8).

Parallel Book of Mormon accounts of bondage to enemies and God’s miraculous deliverance reflect this same scriptural pattern. We observe this pattern with Alma’s people in the land of Helam: “He [Amulon] exercised authority over them, and put tasks upon them, and put task-masters over them. And it came to pass that so great were their afflictions that they began to cry mightily to God. And Amulon commanded them that they should stop their cries; and he put guards over them to watch them, that whosoever should be found calling upon God should be put to death. And Alma and his people did not raise their voices to the Lord their God, but did pour out their hearts to him; and he did know the thoughts of their hearts. And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord came to them in their afflictions, saying: Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage” (Mosiah 24:9–13).

Although the end-time version of bondage to enemies is briefer in duration, its reality matches what occurred in the past: “Thus says my Lord Jehovah: ‘At first my people went down to Egypt to sojourn there. Then the Assyrians subjected them for nothing. And now, what have I here?’ says Jehovah. ‘My people are taken over without price; those who govern them act presumptuously’” (Isaiah 52:4–5).

This passage compares Israel’s bondage in Egypt to its later subjection to Assyria and then uses both to predict an end-time bondage or captivity in which the political leaders of God’s people “take them over” and Lord it over them as the Egyptians and Assyrians did anciently. An end-time Assyria’s conquest of the world, moreover, maintains and perpetuates this bondage, so that from the time God’s end-time people apostatize, they begin to continuously suffer the covenant curse of subjection to enemies.

Those of his people who repent, on the other hand, God releases from bondage after the curse has served its purpose of restoring them to a true covenant relationship with him: “Thus says my Lord, Jehovah of Hosts: ‘O my people who inhabit Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrians, though they strike you with the rod or raise their staff over you, as did the Egyptians’” (Isaiah 10:24); “I will break Assyria in my own land, trample them underfoot on my mountains; their yoke shall be taken from them, their burden removed from their shoulders” (Isaiah 14:25); “In that day their burdens shall be lifted from your shoulders, their yoke [removed] from your neck: the yoke [that wore away your fatness] shall by fatness wear away” (Isaiah 10:27).

The prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation showing how God will release the repentant Ephraimite Gentiles and house of Israel lineages from the curse of bondage in a new exodus to Zion: “Behold, I say unto you, the redemption of Zion must needs come by power; Therefore, I will raise up unto my people a man, who shall lead them like as Moses led the children of Israel. For ye are the children of Israel, and of the seed of Abraham, and ye must needs be led out of bondage by power, and with a stretched-out arm. And as your fathers were led at the first, even

so shall the redemption of Zion be. Therefore, let not your hearts faint, for I say not unto you as I said unto your fathers: Mine angel shall go up before you, but not my presence. But I say unto you: Mine angels shall go up before you, and also my presence, and in time ye shall possess the goodly land” (Doctrine & Covenants 103:15–20).