

The Other Great Tribulation

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Christ prophesies in Matthew 24:21 about a coming Great Tribulation "such as had not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be." He refers to an extraordinary end-time event—one that most readers will be familiar with—and He uses comparative language in doing so. It is plain from His comments that other tribulations have occurred in the past, and that they will continue into the future until this final, consummate one brings an end to all tribulations.

This passage refers to the Tribulation to end all tribulations, the greatest of them all.

However, let us consider another great tribulation and look at some of its parallels in the modern American experience. In Acts 7, at the beginning of his famous apologia, Stephen uses exactly the same words that Christ does in Matthew 24. The word order is the same, even the inflections are the same. Word for word, he uses exactly the same words to describe another great tribulation, one that happened in the past. "Now a famine and great trouble [*great affliction*, KJV] came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance" (Acts 7:11).

The Greek words are the same as in Matthew 24, but obviously, the great tribulation suffered by Egypt in Joseph's time is not at all the same as the future Tribulation that Christ mentions in Matthew 24. The use of identical language is, of course, not accidental and begs our attention.

Stephen says that Egypt and Canaan suffered greatly from two things: first, from "famine," and second, from "great trouble." The sense of the Greek is that the famine, the lack of food, *caused* the great trouble that Stephen speaks of here. The tribulation does not stand alone. J.B. Phillips translates Stephen's statement as, "Then came the famine over all the land of Egypt and Canaan which caused great suffering."

The tribulation of which Stephen speaks went beyond the famine itself. After all, the people, because of Joseph's planning, did have access to some food. Apparently, there was not mass starvation at this time in Egypt. What form did this famine-induced great tribulation take in Egypt? Today, we would say that the famine caused economic, social, and political upheaval. "Upheaval" is a slightly weak word, and by the conclusion of this study, we will see that the word "revolution" is more accurate.

Money Failed

In just seven years—the seven years of famine—the Egyptians saw their freedoms and economic prerogatives fly away and their lifestyles change dramatically. The first listed casualty of this famine-triggered tribulation was monetary.

And Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, for the grain which they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. (Genesis 47:14)

The Egyptians were not a bunch of degenerate Bedouins living on the edge, caught in the backwaters of civilization, and laboring under some inefficient and very limiting bartering system. Nothing like

that! Rather, as one of the chief nations on the earth at the time, theirs was a complex society with some sort of monetary system. That monetary system completely collapsed due to the repeated crop failures in Egypt.

Joseph's response was to sell Egypt's grain on the spot market. All transactions were cash-and-carry. There was no credit. What occurred was, effectively, centralized control of the money supply. The government came into ownership of all the money, and the people had virtually none at all. However, note verses 15-16, for the people lost far more than their medium of exchange:

So when the money failed in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, for why should we die in your presence? For the money has failed." Then Joseph said, "Give your livestock, and I will give you bread for your livestock, if the money is gone."

So the people at this point sold their means of livelihood—their livestock in this case—to the government. Matters worsened the next year:

When that year had ended, they came to [Joseph] the next year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is gone; my lord also has our herds of livestock. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for bread, and we will be servants of Pharaoh; give us seed, that we may live and not die, that the land may not be desolate." (Genesis 47:18-19)

Many people conceive of ancient Egypt as having a small ruling aristocracy, a priestly caste, and a military class, and then millions and millions of slaves. Yet, that is not how it was at all—at least not before this tribulation. What we witness in the story of the seven years of famine is instead a picture of a free people who became slaves, selling their livelihoods, their land, and finally themselves to the government. The tribulation of that day was so great that the Egyptians literally "sold the farm" to Pharaoh.

Then Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for every man of the Egyptians sold his field, because the famine was severe upon them. So the land became Pharaoh's. (Genesis 47:20)

The economic change was dramatic, and it was widespread. It was not local but national.

And as for the people, he moved them into the cities, from one end of the borders of Egypt to the other end. . . . Then Joseph said to the people, "Indeed I have bought you and your land this day for Pharaoh. Look, here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And it shall come to pass in the harvest that you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh." . . . And Joseph made it a law over the land of Egypt to this day, that Pharaoh should have one-fifth, except for the land of the priests only, which did not become Pharaoh's. (Genesis 47:21, 23-24, 26)

Before God instituted this great tribulation in Egypt, the people were a relatively free people, living where they wished and enjoying the private ownership of land. They also owned the means of

production; in this case, the livestock. Egypt was not, at this time, a socialist state. Yet, as a result of this great distress that they were suffering, the money supply dried up, and the people became serfs. They became slaves to the government.

They were relocated at the will of the government that owned them. Their basically capitalistic system—capitalistic because capitalism is connected with the ownership of land—gave way to a far more limiting and inefficient means of allocating goods and services called "feudalism." The people became serfs, sharecroppers. All of this in seven years!

This is why the word "upheaval" seems so weak. What happened in Egypt can only be described as a time of social and economic *revolution*. It was indeed a great tribulation.

Parallels to Recent Times

Intriguing parallels exist between the Egyptian great tribulation in Joseph's time and the American experience in the 1900s, particularly focusing on the 1930s. This is not to argue that the troubles in Egypt were a type of the Great Depression because there are some major differences, especially in the area of credit availability. Nevertheless, the parallels between these two eras are unmistakable. Four of them are worthy of note.

First, as in Egypt, the failure of America's monetary supply in the 1930s started on the farm. It did not start on Wall Street—it *ended* on Wall Street. The agricultural failures of the '30s, during the drought of the Dust Bowl years, eventually reverberated throughout the entire economy. Those years of drought-caused tribulation brought revolutionary changes both in the money supply and in the social policy of the United States.

For instance, the federal bureaucracy grew in that time probably about as fast as Egypt's did in Joseph's day. At the same time, Americans witnessed a major abridgement of their freedoms, one of which continues unabated to this day. Just as in Joseph's day, when the Egyptians volunteered to sell their livestock, lands, and lives to the government, Americans of the Depression Era seemed to ask for increased government involvement in and control of their lives. They voted for Franklin Roosevelt, as he would say it, "Again and again and again and again." Today, the Constitution with its Bill of Rights counts for little more than a piece of memorabilia.

Second, like Egypt, America has undergone a revolutionary urbanization over the past one hundred years or so. American farmers by the millions have vacated their land and moved into the cities, usually for economic reasons—to find better jobs. In many cases—and this is true not only for the 1930s but before and after that decade—they were forced to move off the land because they could not pay the mortgage. Even today, the confiscatory federal inheritance tax forces heirs literally to sell the farm of their deceased parents.

Urbanization has been forced on Americans by the government's tax and banking policies. Americans have become tax slaves forced to give Pharaoh, as it were, far more than the twenty percent that Joseph asked. (By the way, a number of monographs written by economists over the years argue that the income tax in fact puts American workers under forced labor. This is an area of economic theory into which we will not stray.)

Third, as in Joseph's time, twentieth-century Americans experienced government control of monetary policy to an extent that was not even dreamed of by this nation's Founding Fathers. Probably the best

example is certainly the most heavy-handed one: Franklin Roosevelt's calling in of the gold in the 1930s, in the early years of that decade's banking crisis. It is an obvious parallel to Joseph's gathering of "all the money that was found in the land of Egypt," as we read in Genesis 47:14.

Fourth, today as in Joseph's day, the word of the ruler has become law. Notice that Joseph was not just the chief administrator in Egypt. Rather, he had the prerogative of establishing laws (Genesis 41:40), which changed the very fabric of Egyptian society.

It is an education to read Franklin Roosevelt's second inaugural address. In it, he issued a veiled—but unmistakable—threat to the Congress of the United States. He said in so many words, "Support my programs to socialize and federalize the American economy, or I will establish a dictatorship." Congress got the message. The President became a virtual king and began to issue a flow of executive orders that has not abated to this very day.

Today, America is wealthy, but only because plastic has replaced gold as money, just as it has replaced steel in industry. America is a society founded on credit and hydrocarbons, not gold and not iron. Look under the veneer of her paper/plastic wealth, and one finds an America in great tribulation to this very day.

The Final Distress

Of course, this is not that final distress, that mother of all tribulations that Christ spoke of in Matthew 24. That will occur later. However, it is clear that Genesis 47 does etch out in faint outlines the nature of that last Tribulation.

Herbert Armstrong often preached on Matthew 24, and he taught us that the famines, the pestilences, the earthquakes, and the wars that are mentioned in verse 7 are not the Tribulation in itself (which is mentioned in verse 21). They are simply precursors to it, and in a sense, they are causes of that Tribulation.

In that final distress, that final Tribulation, Israelites—not only Americans but all Israelites—having cast their gold in the street, will be bereft of money (Ezekiel 7:19; Zephaniah 1:18). At that time, the credit system will be defunct. They will be without property, without homes, without cars, and without the means of production. Lacking personal freedoms, they will be slaves, moved at the will of the malevolent state, which owns them.

That malevolent state will perpetuate all of this with the terrible efficiency that history records former heads of the Beast utilizing (Revelation 17:7-18). The horrors of Auschwitz will appear tame. Let us "watch therefore, and pray always" (Luke 21:36) that we may be reckoned worthy to escape all these things, and to find a place of safety, as God wills.