



Exodus - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

The chapter commences with a brief resume of the patriarchs coming to Egypt and how the Hebrew nation became prolific from just seventy migrants.

A long time had passed since Joseph had played his part in saving Egypt from famine and disaster. The new Pharaoh could only see the Hebrew nation as a threat to Egypt so he enslaved them and used them as forced labour, yet they grew even stronger and were seen as an even greater threat.

To combat the threat Pharaoh instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill all male children at birth but to let the girls live. The midwives did not obey Pharaoh because they feared God more than him and when questioned by him as to why not, they made up a story that the Hebrew women gave birth quickly before the midwives arrived. Again, Pharaoh issued the decree that all male babies were to be drowned in the Nile but the girls could live.

I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt

The entirety of the first half of the book of Exodus is focused on the exodus of the people of Israel out of Egypt: the setting (1:1-2:25), their leadership (3:1-6:30), the signs from God (7:1-15:21), and the journey itself (15:22-18:27).

I.a Exodus 1:1-2:25 - Setting: Israel in Egypt

The opening section sets the stage for the rest of the book by describing: the connection to the narrative of Genesis (Exodus 1:1-7), the oppression that has arisen under a new pharaoh (1:8-22), the preservation of Moses at birth (2:1-10) and later in Midian (2:11-22), and the declaration of God's intimate knowledge of Israel's suffering and God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham and his descendants (2:23-25).

I.a.i Exodus 1:1-7 - The Sons of Jacob Become the People of Israel

This section links the events of Joseph bringing Jacob and all his brothers to Egypt as recounted in Genesis 46:8-26, and the death of that generation (Genesis 50:26) with their descendants living in Egypt.

¹ These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household:

Exodus 1:1

The sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob. Two names are used to refer to the same person: Israel and Jacob. It is similar to the statement that starts in Genesis 46:8a: <<*Now these are the names of the Israelites, Jacob and his offspring, who came to Egypt*>>. The dual reference reminds the reader of the previous narrative in Genesis where God declared that Jacob would be called Israel (Genesis 32:28 and 35:10), and connects the narrative of Exodus with the promise that God would be faithful to the covenant that he made with Abraham and reaffirmed with Jacob (Genesis 35:11-12). God's faithfulness to remember and fulfil his covenant promises is a central theme in the book of Exodus.

² Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, ³ Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, ⁴ Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

Exodus 1:2-4

The names of the sons of Jacob, apart from Joseph, are given in the order of their birth with respect to the mother who bore them, i.e. Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. The same list of names with the addition of Joseph is found in Genesis 35:23-26 with the name of the mother listed before her sons.

⁵ The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. ⁶ Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation.

Exodus 1:5-6

The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. In Stephen's speech at his trial before the Sanhedrin, he cites the number as seventy five. Stephen used the Septuagint translation rather than the original Hebrew. The different texts were apparently based on different decisions regarding whether to include Jacob and his wife, and the additional descendants born to Ephraim and Manasseh in Egypt. Refer to the comments made on Genesis 46:26-27 and Acts 7:14.

Joseph was the remarkable great-grandson of Abraham whom God chose to save Egypt, and indeed the whole region, from terrible famine because he listened to

God's voice speaking through Pharaoh's dream. Because of his wisdom and administration, Joseph was lifted to high and honoured office in Egypt. Yet eventually, Joseph died and the status his family enjoyed died out with him.

⁷ But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Exodus 1:7

The Hebrew phrase translated the Israelites is the same phrase rendered as <<*the sons of Israel*>> in v.1. Since the narrative has just referred to the death of Joseph and all his generation (v.6), the focus shifts here from the specific twelve sons of Jacob to their offspring who have become the people of Israel. The vocabulary used to describe their growth, i.e. they were fruitful, multiplied, and the land was filled with them, parallels that of God's command to mankind at creation in Genesis 1:28, as well as his later reiteration to Jacob (Genesis 35:11).

I.a.ii Exodus 1:8-2:25 - New Pharaoh, New Situation

The coming to power (v.8) and death (2:23) of a new king of Egypt frame this section, which describes both how the peaceful existence of Jacob's family in Egypt turned into one of oppression through enslavement (vv.8-22), and how these circumstances became the context in which God preserved the life of Moses in order to raise him up as their leader (2:1-22).

I.a.ii.1 Exodus 1:8-22 - The Israelites Are Oppressed

Because Pharaoh feared the increasing numbers of the Hebrew nation, he had them enslaved and worked them ferociously. Yet they became stronger still so Pharaoh gave instructions for all male babies to be killed at birth.

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

Exodus 1:8

The reference to a new leader in Egypt who did not know Joseph presumes that the reader is familiar with the narrative of Joseph's entry, problems, and rise to power in Egypt; refer to Genesis Chapters 37-50, especially 41:37-45.

⁹ He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.'

Exodus 1:9-10

Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them. The ancient Egyptians were famous, or more accurately infamous, for their proud sense of racial superiority towards all other people. It is not surprising, therefore, to see them afraid and discriminating against this strong minority group in their midst, which looked as if it would not be a minority very long! As the psalmist would later write: <<***And the Lord made his people very fruitful, and made them stronger than their foes, whose hearts he then turned to hate his people, to deal craftily with his servants***>> (Psalm 105:24-25).

In the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us. At the time, the Egyptians feared invasion from the Hittites of the north. If the Hebrews among them joined with the Hittites, it posed a significant threat to their security.

¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

Exodus 1:11-12

Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. When the children of Israel were set to slave labour they built many of the great cities and monuments in Egypt, although not the pyramids, which were built much earlier. Since it is not known exactly when this forced labour began, it cannot be known how long it lasted. Some estimate the slavery lasted 284 years, others 134 years but there are many variables to consider.

The description of the taskmasters who were put in place to afflict Israel echoes the vocabulary of God's covenant with Abraham in which he foretold that his offspring would sojourn in a foreign land and <<***be oppressed for four hundred years***>> (Genesis 15:13b). It is commonly accepted today that the site of Raamses is located at Qantir in the eastern Nile delta about 12 miles or 19 km south of Tanis. Excavations have confirmed this identification. During the Second Millennium BC, a massive settlement of Asiatic foreigners lived here. At any given time in the history of Egypt there was a significant substratum of slaves. Many of these were captives of war, but there was also a large slave trade. So many of the slaves came from Asia, especially Canaan, Mesopotamia, Hatti, and Syria, that the word Asiatic became synonymous with slave. In addition, a factory has been discovered at the site; it produced decorated glazed tiles. Pottery fragments found in the factory bear the name Raamses. Pithom is probably located at Tell el Retabe, about 17 miles or 27 km southeast of Raamses.

The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread. This was God's purpose for Israel's time in Egypt. Egypt served as a mother's womb for Israel, a place where they rapidly grew from a large clan to a mighty nation. The nation could not have grown this way in Canaan because it was practically impossible to avoid intermarriage with the pagan and wicked inhabitants of Canaan, or at least for them to be drawn into their lifestyle and idol worship. Egypt was so racially biased and had such an entrenched system of racial separation that Israel could grow there over several centuries without being assimilated. This growth in the face of affliction has consistently been the story of God's people, throughout all ages - the more they are afflicted, the more they grow. As the ancient Christian writer Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." Suffering and persecution are like a great wave that comes upon a ship and looks as if it will destroy it; but the ship catches the wave and just uses it to speed along.

¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

Exodus 1:13-14

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service. Because God's purpose was to bless Israel, and fulfil his role for them in his eternal plan, no amount of affliction could defeat his purpose. The Egyptians tried their best through cruel slavery; but it did not work. The principle of Isaiah 54:17 proved true: **<<No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper, and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgement. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their vindication from me, says the Lord>>**. The wickedness of the Egyptians could hurt the children of Israel, but could never defeat God's plan for them. Pharaoh thought it best to not kill them; but he did want them to be slaves. In the midst of their cruel and harsh service, life must have seemed hopeless to the children of Israel, and the idea that God was working out his plan must have seemed very far away; yet it was true nevertheless.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶ 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.' ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸ So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' ¹⁹ The

midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.'²⁰ So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.²¹ And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.'

Exodus 1:15-22

The Hebrew midwives show through their defiant actions that they feared God more than they feared the king of Egypt, a brave but wise choice: <<*By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord one avoids evil*>> (Proverbs 16:6), and: <<*Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him*>> (Ecclesiastes 8:12). For the narrator to say this twice shows that he commends them for their faith. Also, this narrative names so few people, not even naming the pharaohs!, that it is probably a further display of the narrator's approval of the women's deeds that he gives their names, Shiphrah and Puah, a detail unnecessary for describing the events themselves. The faithfulness of these two midwives is also an indication that there were those among the people of Israel who still feared God after all the years of enslavement and before there was any knowledge of God's call of Moses. The exemplary actions of the midwives signify a central theme of the Book of Exodus: Israel is called to fear God above any other ruler, nation, or circumstance.

The use of the term boy is thematic for Chapters 1-15. In an attempt to prevent a possible future rebellion, the king of Egypt here calls for all the male children of Israel to be killed at birth. When God instructs Moses about what he will say to Pharaoh, he refers to Israel as his 'firstborn son' (4:22) and warns that refusal to listen will lead to the death of Egypt's firstborn (4:23), which comes about in the tenth plague (12:29-30).

The midwives said to Pharaoh. When challenged as to why they did not carry out Pharaoh's decrees, the midwives gave an answer that some have called deceptive. It is uncertain that the reply is, strictly speaking, untrue; nor is it clear whether this is all that the women said. The narrator simply commends the women for refusing to comply with Pharaoh's murderous scheme. Some would argue that, with such an evil plan, Pharaoh had forfeited any right to expect obedience or complete truthfulness from his subjects. Exodus, however, reports these events without giving any moral evaluation, its chief purpose being to help its readers rejoice that God had wonderfully preserved his people from Pharaoh and had given his people the strength to resist in the face of oppression.

The people multiplied and became very strong. The worse the persecution against God's plan to multiply the children of Israel in Egypt, the more God made sure the plan succeeded. This is a wonderful example of the goodness and the power of God. Pharaoh said 'less' and God said 'more.' Pharaoh said 'stop' and God said 'go.' If the battle were just between Pharaoh and the people of Israel, Pharaoh would have clearly won. However, the real battle included God in the equation, and that changed everything. God obviously won this battle; but he won his victory through some courageous individuals who were willing to stand up to the power of Pharaoh and do what was right.

Pharaoh chooses to let every girl live because he is primarily worried about the threat of Israel's male population joining with a foreign army against Egypt (v.10). However, it is the faithfulness of some of Israel's daughters who fear God more than Pharaoh that is highlighted here through the actions of Shiphrah and Puah, and in the following narrative it is reflected in Moses' mother and sister (2:1-10); they are part of the means by which God will eventually bring his people out of slavery. Furthermore, it is ironic that Pharaoh's own daughter is also one who acts to preserve the life of Moses, through whom God will bring Israel out of Egypt.