

Bible Study #2 Ex. 1:1–22 02/09/2021

Exodus begins by tying its story to Genesis. Chapters 37–50 in Genesis is the Jacob cycle. The entire time of the residence in Egypt is 430 years according to Ex. 12:40 and Gen. 15:13. While living there, the family of Jacob (a.k.a. Israel) prospered and grew.

I'm sure you know how Joseph was the first member of the family to arrive in Egypt (if not, go online and ask for the history of Joseph). When vs. 1–5 lists Jacob and the remaining family members who came to Egypt, it lists the remaining 11 children of Jacob by name.

Jacob's sons are listed not by birth order, but as follows: Leah's sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun), Rachel's son (Benjamin), Rachel's maid Bilhah's sons (Dan and Naphtali), and Leah's maid Zilpah's sons (Gad and Asher). The order of these names reinforces the sequence in Genesis 35:23–26, where Jacob accepted God's final promises to him (Gen. 35:9–15).

The way we get up to 70 as we are told in v. 5 is that Jacob and each of his remaining sons brought their whole households. From that small beginning, the family prospered and grew. Joseph had been a hero to the generation of Egyptians who were alive because he had saved them as well as his family by saving food during the 7 good years of abundant harvest so they had food during the 7 years of famine.

Exodus is the second "chapter" in the ongoing narrative of God's work, creating a people who will bring blessings to all the nations. As in Genesis, God's work with the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob continued in Exodus. We are reminded that they "went to Egypt" and remained as "sojourners," though they lived there for many generations.

This emerging nation would be commonly referred to as the "sons of Israel" (lit., "children of Israel;" sometimes translated "Israelites" in the NIV). The name "Jacob," here and elsewhere in Scripture, recalls his struggle in becoming "Israel" (lit., "God rules"). The name reflects Jacob's striving "with God and with humans" and his prevailing (Gen. 32:28).

Especially significant for understanding Exodus 1:1–7 is God's command to "be fruitful and multiply" and the promise that kings would come from his family in the land of promise (cf. Gen. 35:9–12). The God of the exodus had already demonstrated faithfulness by appearing, guiding, protecting, and redeeming the family to whom God had repeated these promises.

The next verse is the introduction to the rest of Exodus. A new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph. We don't know how many years into their residence in Egypt this occurred. We only have educated guesses. I believe it was at least half-way through their time in Egypt. The story of how the Israelites came to Egypt and how one of them had been a hero of their past.

This is a reminder of how we have to keep telling the story of our history, both good and bad, so we can understand and appreciate our heritage in our country and also the history of God working in and through his people in the past.

Another lesson is that we might welcome a small number of people from other nations, but as they grow and become larger and more important in elections, leadership, etc. we may become fearful of them. Note the words of the king in v. 9: "The people of Israel are too many and mighty for us." He feared and got others to fear that if Egypt was attacked, the Israelites might side with their enemy.

Now instead of being grateful for what they had done for Egypt, they enslaved them and to be sure they could control them. Most interpreters date it in the nineteenth dynasty of Egypt under Rameses II (ca. 1290–1224

B.C.) and his successor Merneptah (ca. 1224–1211 B.C.). Rameses II moved Egypt's administration to the Nile's eastern delta.

The text does not name this pharaoh (king). Whoever he was, he created obstacles to the fulfillment of the promises God made to Abraham. It seems the real problem the king has with them is the fear they would leave the country and they wouldn't have all the labor they needed to remain a prosperous nation. Before the children of Israel were victims of forced labor, they were subject to forced residency in a totalitarian state.

Joseph had to ask the pharaoh's permission to go to Canaan to bury his father Jacob (Gen. 50:4–14). This set him in direct opposition to God's two promises to Jacob: that "a company of nations" would come from him and that God would give him the land of Canaan (Gen. 35:11–12). This sets the stage for the battle between the God of creation ("be fruitful and multiply") and of history ("I will give you the land") and the Pharaoh.

The slave masters were Egyptian (Exod. 5:6, 14). Literally, they were "captains of labor gangs," so "taskmasters" is a better translation here. They oversaw the building of the northern and northeastern border towns, Pithom and Rameses, that served as military supply cities for protection and campaigns.

The word root translated "oppressed" means "violently afflicted," or "cruelly crushed." It includes the graphic nature of dispiriting violence. Yet the population continued to multiply, fulfilling God's command to fill the earth. This frightened the Egyptians and caused them to loathe (dread) the Israelites. They responded with even more vigorous brutality.

The fact that the Israelites continued to thrive even under extreme duress was like a plague to the Egyptians. They could not explain it except that God helped them. The agents of life and death in creation were the Lord's to command, yet Pharaoh believed that they were under his personal control.

They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly. The literary key here (vv. 12–14) is the five occurrences of the Hebrew word root ('abad), translated "hard labor," "work," and "used." "Used them ruthlessly" expresses the corruption of the goodness of work (Gen. 2:15).

The midwives' courage and fear of the Lord (vs. 15–22) contrast with a powerful, yet paranoid, pharaoh. Although the chapter begins with the patriarchal list, the hope of the Israelites was in the daily life of the Hebrew home and childbirth. Here we see the beginning of the key role women played in God's deliverance of Israel from crisis in Exodus. The two midwives and their sassy courage dominate the narrative.

Because of the extreme difference in political power, the conversation between the midwives and Pharaoh is ironically humorous. It is odd that Pharaoh himself spoke to these women and that the ruler of Egypt would say, "When you . . . observe them on the delivery stool." The command "if it is a boy, kill him" is also ironic, because it reveals that Pharaoh thought men were the threat.

The midwives feared God (vs. 17, 21) and we desperately need people today who believe that the murder of infants is wrong in God's eyes. The phrase feared God announces an important theme for the book of Exodus. The "fear of God" was the belief that certain things were wrong simply because they were contrary to the order of the life God had woven into the fabric of the created world (see 9:30; 14:31; 18:31; 20:20; also Gen. 20:11).

When Pharaoh asked, "Why have you done this?" the women responded, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." The women removed suspicion from themselves by stating what was partly true. They spared the boys through a form of "civil disobedience," since it is unlikely they arrived too late for every birth.

Pharaoh gave a command, “Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile.” The word “Nile” is an Egyptian loan word that simply means “water” or “canal.” In Egypt, that usually meant the Nile River and its tributaries. What had begun as forced residency escalated to forced labor, then to increased brutality, to a policy of forced infanticide, and finally to a general order to all his people to kill Hebrew babies.

This command sets up several ironies for the continuing narrative. Is the Nile a source of life or of death? Who is ruler of the great river, if not the one who would turn it to blood? Who would God drown in the Reed Sea, but the Egyptians (14:28)? God repeats the pattern of using creational means that “match the crime” to resolve injustice throughout the Pentateuch and the Prophets.

A second irony prevails, for Pharaoh repeated the command to let every girl live. As we will see in Exodus 2, females were used more by God to thwart the machinations of the mighty pharaoh. In spite of their resistance, it is clear that the Hebrew people need salvation. Pharaoh’s command sets up a narrative tension for the birth of Moses in Exodus 2:1.

Tomorrow we will study Ex. 2:1–10.