

Exodus 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 1. These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household. Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons.

Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and if war breaks out they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. Therefore they set task masters over them, to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Python and Ramses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied, and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves, and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work of the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifra, and the other Pua, When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him. But if it is a daughter, she shall live. But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, Why have you done this, and let the male children live? 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. So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.

Exodus chapter 1 begins the great story of God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. This passage takes for granted a general knowledge of the book of Genesis, and more explicitly recalls Genesis chapter 46. Its opening words, and these are the names, directly recalls Genesis chapter 46, verse 8. This story is taking up the threads that we have just left in Genesis. If Genesis looked forward to the events of the Exodus, with the stories surrounding the burial of Joseph and of Jacob, the story here looks back to the story of Genesis and picks up some of the details from it.

[3 : 0 2] While the sons are listed in Genesis chapter 46, the order of the sons that we have here comes from Genesis chapter 35, verses 23 to 26. This is possibly because in the context, in verses 10 to 12 of chapter 35, there's the promise of being fruitful and multiplying.

The tribes are listed according to their mothers, not according to the order of the birth of the children themselves. The two handmaids are reversed and correspond to the respective wives in a book of ended form. So it starts with Leah, and it ends with Zilpah. And in the centre you have Rachel's child Benjamin, and then the children of Bilhah. There's one detail that's different from Genesis chapter 35 that's worth noting. Reuben is not referred to as the firstborn here, perhaps on account of his demoted status. The text refers to the 70 who came down into Egypt, and it also highlights 12 as the number of the tribes. 12 and 70, as we've seen already, are significant numbers. They're associated with the identity of Israel, and appear at many points in Israel's history. There's 12 tribes, and there's 70 elders. In a few chapters' time, we'll encounter Elim, where there are 12 springs and 70 palm trees.

Israel is fruitful and multiplying, recalling the blessing of Genesis chapter 1. They're fulfilling the calling given to Adam and Eve, and the promise given to Abram. And this can be contrasted with the struggles of the story of Genesis, where the women within the story, whether it's Rebecca, whether it's Sarah, whether it's Rachel, are struggling to give birth and experiencing painful birth. Here, while there are struggles surrounding birth, those struggles come purely from outside. The women are giving birth at a rate of knots. There's no way to stop them. There is an exponential growth of the population of the people.

The language here is not just the language of fruitfulness and multiplication. There's language more typically used of the swarming of insects. You can imagine how the Egyptians are seeing this.

Their cockroaches filling the land, or like locusts devouring the land. That's how they appear to the Egyptians. And the cluster of words for growth in verse 7 drive this point home. They are increasing in number at a truly incredible rate. And while we usually associate death with terror, there's something about an excess of life that can be monstrous and terrifying too. And perhaps this is the way that the Egyptians are seeing the Israelites at this point. When they finally leave, it's not with the 70 that they first came down with, but with 600,000 people, which gives some sense of the growth that they have experienced. The rising of a new king might refer not just to someone new coming to the throne, but to the start of a new dynasty. It's not just someone in the existing line of succession. And this person doesn't know Joseph. Well, maybe he knows Joseph on the history books, but there's no sense of a duty to Joseph or an appreciation of what he has done for Egypt and the responsibility that Egypt has to his descendants and his family. The Israelites have now become a threat as a large and powerful foreign population that is distinct from the Egyptians. They haven't assimilated into the nation. They're a distinct body of people. And Pharaoh fears that if there is a war, the Israelites will fight on the side of the enemies of the Egyptians, rise up and gain supremacy. Pharaoh perhaps knows that there's an order to the blessing that's given in Genesis chapter one. Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and they've reached that stage and subdue it. There's a concern that they're going to subdue the land.

[6 : 48] Pharaoh's concerns here are those of a shrewd politician, if a particularly unscrupulous one. He sees the parameters of the situation. He sees that they don't look good. And so he wants to take a pre-emptive strike against this potential enemy of his people and to ensure that they do not rise up in such a manner. We need to be aware of reading Exodus simply as a story of straightforward good versus evil, although there is good versus evil. It's a more subtle and consequently powerful story than that.

Pharaoh is a typical baddie in most tellings of the story, but Pharaoh has motives. Pharaoh has reasoning behind his approach that make clear to the careful reader that he is a three-dimensional character and that perhaps by reflecting upon this story we might learn something about our situations.

Israel is then afflicted and enslaved as God foretold to Abraham in Genesis chapter 15 verse 13. They're reduced to a sort of servitude and Pharaoh conscripts the Israelites into a great city building project. The alert reader might think back to the story of Babel in chapter 11 of Genesis, where once again a story begins with, come let us, bricks are fired in order to build a great city and a building project of a tower. And here we're seeing that same thing playing out again. This is a Babelic project. However, even as the Israelites are oppressed, they grow in number and they spread out even further. The Egyptians are in fear and dread of the Israelites, much as the animals were in relationship to man after the flood. And Pharaoh moves at this point on to infanticide. This is plan B. The initial plan has failed and so he wants to move on even further. So he instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys. Now the midwives are either Hebrew midwives or midwives to the Hebrews.

Their names suggest that they are probably Hebrews, but the important thing to notice is that their names are given to us. Pharaoh's name is forgotten and there's much debate about who this Pharaoh actually is. But the names of the midwives are remembered and their heroism ensures that they are still remembered and spoken of to this day. They're the first names that we encounter in the actual story of the book of Exodus, beyond the initial statements about Joseph and the family of Jacob. Their names stand out in the context of anonymous figures. Pharaoh's name is not given to us. Pharaoh's daughter's name is not given to us. Her servant girl's name is not given to us. Moses' mother, her name is not given to us here. And even Miriam's name is not mentioned at this point.

Even though we are told the names of Jochebed and Miriam later, the Hebrew midwives then are the only ones whose names are given at this point. It's not entirely clear what the stones refer to. Some have seen it as the birth stool, the stones on which women squatted while in labour. Alternatively, it could refer to the genitals of the child, to see the sex of the child and to kill the boys.

[9 : 53] The boys were to be killed and presumably the girls were to be taken. The girls were to be brides for the Egyptians. We can think back to the story of Genesis chapter 12, where the threat was that Abram would be killed and Sarai would be taken. This is the same sort of thing that we're seeing here.

The threat often in scripture and elsewhere in history has been the removal of the men, leaving the women vulnerable to being taken by foreign powers. As in the story of Genesis, deception is the response. The Hebrew midwives deceive Pharaoh. They play upon the Egyptian xenophobia and superstition, it seems. When we fear another group, we can easily ascribe to them some special quality or power that exceeds or diminishes regular humanity. And this seems to be what's taking place here. The Hebrew women are not like regular Egyptian women. They are far more vigorous, and as a result, they bear children even before the midwives get to them. The Hebrew midwives' deception of Pharaoh probably plays upon the story of the fall. In the story of the fall, the woman is deceived by the serpent. And in story after story in the Old Testament, women deceive tyrants. There is a poetic justice as the women get their own back upon the serpent, upon the tyrants. The midwives stand out for their courage. They disobey orders, they deceive Pharaoh, and Jonathan Sachs has suggested that this is the first recorded account in history of civil disobedience. This is an example of people just disobeying orders. When those orders are wicked, they refuse to obey. And their courage has stood testament to them to this day. God blesses the midwives with families of their own. Bear in mind that many of the women who would have become midwives would have done so because they had no children of their own. And here God blesses these midwives with children of their own. And the Israelites continue to multiply and they're fruitful. And the response to this is plan C.

If subjection to servitude was not enough, if the instruction to the midwives didn't work, then time for a different option. Time for the nuclear option. We're going to kill all the baby boys.

And so Pharaoh tells his men to drown the baby boys in the river Nile. The Nile will both be the means of killing them and it will cover up the crime. A question to consider. It's no accident the book of Exodus begins with themes of birth and struggling in birth. These are themes that relate not just to individuals within the nation, but to the nation as a whole. The nation is struggling to be born.

And this story plays out the birth of Israel as God's firstborn son. Not just the birth of baby boys to women within the nation, but an event of national and epochal significance. And in its presentation of this reality, the book of Exodus begins with women's centre stage. The Hebrew midwives, the mother of Moses, the sister of Moses, Pharaoh's daughter and her handmaid. This is a story that begins with and focuses upon women. There are other stories that begin and focus upon women in the Bible.

[13 : 11] Which stories are these? And what similarities are there between this story and those stories? Why do you think that God begins such stories with such a focus upon women?