



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1–15

B. The scene is set—Exodus 1 (Part 1)

Mark Vincent

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes that will be dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **sub-sections** or **episodes** (these are typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest from the text. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional 'one-off' points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly. Some of these are more technical or tangential in nature.

Occasionally there will be some overlap between **Comment** and **Footnotes**, although this has been avoided whenever possible. The author suggests that general readers ignore the footnotes as a rule, unless they see something highlighted that particularly interests them. Those wishing to use the commentary for reference should note that, even if a word or phrase in the text is not footnoted, this does not necessarily mean that it is not commented on—glance at the **Introductions**, certainly, but remember that, **as a rule, most of the information is contained in the Comments.**

Introduction

EXODUS 1 deals with three topics:

- 1 The remarkable growth of the Israelites from seventy persons to a great nation in the land of Egypt;
- 2 The tyranny of Pharaoh and his attempt to reverse that growth;
- 3 The remarkable faith of two Hebrew midwives, who obeyed God rather than the king.

The first two topics are covered in this article, leaving the third to be dealt with in the next article. In dealing with these topics the chapter introduces us to many of the major issues that will be played out in the ensuing chapters.

One thing Exodus 1 does not say very much about is God Himself. Indeed, God is in the background, working behind the scenes, as it were, until we arrive at chapter 3. We see Israel, and we see Pharaoh in whose hand the fate of Israel apparently lay. This is one of the great themes of the Exodus account: who is Israel's lord really? It looks as if it is Pharaoh, and indeed, Pharaoh will do all that is within his power to prove it to be so. But the God of heaven is about to reveal Himself and to seek to redeem the Israelites to Himself.

It is a scenario that repeats itself for every disciple. The world is so real, so physical, so dominant as a physical power in our lives; worldly values and concerns seem to rule our ways. But the story of salvation is about God's wish to redeem us from that deathly fate. The world wants our allegiance, and its demands can seem so much more immediate than those of the Father, just as Pharaoh's claims seemed to be over the Israelites.

In chapter 1 God has not begun to make Himself fully known in miracle, sign or proclamation, and Pharaoh appears to hold full sway. But, even in such a darkness, the faith of a small faithful remnant shines clear in the conduct of the two midwives. No doubt they could discern that, behind the incredible numerical progress of the Israelites, the hand of God was to be seen.

In human terms, then, the odds are heavily stacked against Israel at the end of Exodus 1, but there is a ray of hope in the resistance of the faithful midwives. The question is whether Israel and her leaders will perceive things according to human terms—or whether they will lift their eyes to heaven to perceive how very different things might be.

The Israelites in Egypt

- 1:1** Now these are the names of the children of Israel, which came into Egypt; every man and his household came with Jacob.
- 1:2** Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah,
- 1:3** Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin,
- 1:4** Dan, and Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.¹
- 1:5** And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls:² for Joseph was in Egypt already.
- 1:6** And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation.
- 1:7** And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them.

Comment

These verses are very important for a number of reasons. First, they provide continuity with the book of Genesis. The whole book of Genesis is structured around a series of genealogies; they are like a backbone which gives shape, continuity and direction to the book, for through them we can see the purposes of God moving forward through history. In taking up the story, therefore, Exodus opens with the same genealogical format; it takes up where Genesis left off and moves forward the record of God's activities with mankind.

Second, the first seven verses show quite vividly how, during the course of the time in Egypt, the Israelites grew from a humble population of seventy into a mighty nation. This theme of fruitfulness receives staggering emphasis in verse 7,

in which there is a fivefold repetition: the Israelites "were fruitful" (1), "increased abundantly" (2), "multiplied" (3), "waxed exceeding mighty" (4), "filled" "the land" (5). As if this level of repetition were not enough, the matter is taken up again in verses 12 and 20.

Third, this fruitfulness of Israel is itself a fulfilment of promises in Genesis. We are reminded of no less than three sets of passages:

- 1** There seems to be an echo of creation language. Adam and Eve were told to "Be fruitful, and multiply", a command repeated in Genesis to different elements of the creation (1:28,22). This is the very thing that Israel as a people are now doing as Exodus opens. They are taking up their part in God's creation—this time the creation of a nation. The book of Exodus opens with a creation, just like Genesis.
- 2** The growth of the Israelites fulfils the promises to Abraham, who had been told that his descendants would be like the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore.
- 3** The promises to Abraham were repeated to Isaac and Jacob, and Jacob in turn passed them to his descendants. Genesis 47 and 48 contain reminders of these promises, which once again form a bridge with Exodus (47:27; 48:4,16,19).

In short, what we are witnessing in these seven verses is the moving forward of God's creative purpose. We are watching the creation of a nation.

The tyranny of Pharaoh

- 1:8** Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew³ not Joseph.
- 1:9** And he said unto his people, Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we:
- 1:10** Come on, let us deal wisely with them;⁴

lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land.

- 1:11** Therefore they did set over them taskmas-

- ters⁵ to afflict⁶ them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses.⁷
- 1:12 But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were grieved because of the children of Israel.
- 1:13 And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour:
- 1:14 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 rigour.⁸

Comment

By way of introductory description Pharaoh receives short shrift. We are told neither his name nor his distinguishing titles and achievements. What we are told is instructive, however, and consists of two details (v. 8).

First, we are told that he was a 'new' king. Whereas God will introduce Himself in chapter 3 as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a God of history and a God of future purpose, Pharaoh is described simply as a novelty. For him there was no connection with the past, no sense of continuity or overarching purpose. In fact (and this is the second point about Pharaoh), he did not even know who Joseph was, the man who had saved his ancestors from famine and who had won the Pharaohs so much land and power! He is defined by ignorance, a man who did not know.

These two details are apt evocations of a worldly mindset we are naturally inclined to serve. The world is always changing; there is always some new thing, and today's ways and values will be passé by tomorrow. For all our education, we live in a world of ignorance, a world in which the lessons of the past and the ways of God have not been learned. Our world does not know Joseph, or any of the other Biblical characters, any more than the new king did. Yet it demands our allegiance just the same.

Consider the king's behaviour. He was motivated not only by ignorance, but by fear as well. Not knowing the true facts about the Israelites, he was worried about what might happen, even though Israel were apparently doing nothing amiss. This fear based on ignorance enables him to justify cruel and unfair behaviour; he lashes out at what he does not understand and seeks to repress it. He copes by an all the more vigorous attempt to illustrate his knowledge, control and

might. There are certainly lessons here, for human behaviour is often patterned along well-worn lines. We can easily overreact to what we do not understand and what we fear, both in the Truth and outside; we can be needlessly rash and harsh when it would take so little effort to find out the true facts.

But Pharaoh's behaviour was yet more extreme, for it was coupled with a serious overdose of power and arrogance. The emphasis which the narrative gives to the forced labour imposed on the Israelites is remarkable. Here are the phrases from verses 11-14; notice the repetition of two Hebrew roots in particular, 'anah (twice) and 'abad (five times) (see also footnote 8):

	English phrase	Hebrew root employed
v. 11	he set . . . lords of burdens (lit.)	<i>mas</i>
v. 11	to afflict them	' <i>anah</i>
v. 11	with their burdens	<i>sevalah</i>
v. 12	they afflicted them	' <i>anah</i>
v. 13	made them serve	' <i>abad</i>
v. 13	with rigour	<i>perech</i>
v. 14	made their lives bitter	<i>marar</i>
v. 14	with hard bondage	' <i>abad</i>
v. 14	all manner of service	' <i>abad</i>
v. 14	all their service	' <i>abad</i>
v. 14	wherein they made them serve	' <i>abad</i>
v. 14	was with rigour	<i>perech</i>

Pharaoh does everything in his power to make the Israelites suffer and to retain his grip over them—and the result of it all is the building of further treasure cities. Such relics of Egyptian culture are famed for their opulence, even in our own materialistic age.

But there is also a wonderful irony in the text. Pharaoh's actions had one effect that was the very opposite of what he had intended. The more the Egyptians afflicted the Israelites, the more they multiplied and grew (v. 12). Pharaoh was incapable of reversing the remarkable chain of

events God had set in motion and which was emphasised with such clarity at the start of the chapter. Pharaoh's efforts to keep the Israelites under his control are mocked by the prolific growth of the Israelites; even at this stage crucial flaws are apparent in the 'total' dominion that Pharaoh seems to exercise. There remains a possibility of another way.

1. **vv. 2-4 tribal list.** The tribal order here is not chronological (witness the position of Benjamin), but rather reflects Genesis 35:23-26. That chapter also contains God's command to Jacob to "be fruitful and multiply" (v. 11), a promise which is being fulfilled in these very verses. The order of sons is as follows: the sons of Leah, the sons of Rachel (the two wives first), the sons of Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid), the sons of Zilpah (Leah's handmaid). In this way the names are listed in an ab ba type of arrangement (Leah, Rachel, Rachel's handmaid, Leah's handmaid). Within this structure the various mothers' sons are presented in chronological order.

2. **v. 5 seventy.** This figure is highly significant, and tallies with Genesis 46:8-27, which lists the male descendants of Jacob. Thirty-three come from Leah, sixteen from Zilpah, fourteen from Rachel and seven from Bilhah, making a total of seventy.

As pointed out in the comment, Exodus portrays the birth of the nation of Israel as they emerge from the bondage (travail) of Egypt. They go into Egypt as seventy souls (scarcely a nation!) but emerge a great and mighty people. God thus frames the nation from these seventy people, just as Genesis 10 describes the population of the world as originating in seventy families. In this way Israel is a type of all nations of the world, a representative, whose experiences and relationship with God are typical both of man and of God's way of dealing with the world at large (see Deuteronomy 32:8). Once this is appreciated, God's purpose with Israel is easier to understand, and it becomes more appropriate to see them as a 'firstfruits' of the nations.

Note that in the New Testament Jesus sends out seventy disciples to preach in Israel (Lk. 10:1), the number surely being a deliberate correspondence. From the preaching of these seventy God was going to bring to birth a new and spiritual nation.

3. **v. 8 know.** This is the first occurrence of this word, and it is used over twenty times in Exodus 1-15. It

makes an interesting study to look at each of these uses, and some comments will be made on how the theme develops as we proceed. At this stage it is worth noting that God will be presented as a God who *knows*, whereas Pharaoh is a ruler who *does not*. God knows the sufferings of His people; this Pharaoh does not even *know* Joseph (the saviour of his ancestors), and neither does his successor *know* the Lord (5:2).

4. **v. 10 Come on, let us deal wisely.** Pharaoh eggs his followers on, inciting them into sin (compare the Tower of Babel story, in which a familiar plural of coercion is used). The episode is a reminder of the influence our attitudes and actions can have on others, especially if we hold positions of responsibility. Ultimately the people would pay for following where Pharaoh led; it would be their first-born sons as well as his that would perish. His scheme of 'dealing wisely' might whisper a reminder of the serpent.

5. **v. 11 taskmasters.** The original Hebrew for taskmasters is not the same word as is usually used later in the story. Here a compound of two words is employed, one meaning 'lord', 'master', 'ruler', the other 'burden' (this makes the Hebrew a good companion for the English 'task + master'). The more usual word used elsewhere means 'to drive', 'afflict' in various senses (lead an army, tax, tyrannise etc.). I do not see any particular significance in the use of different terminology here.

6. **v. 11 afflict them with their burdens.** The Hebrew words for 'afflict' (*'anah*) and 'burdens' (*'abad*, connected with service) are the same as those used in Genesis 15:13, which records that God told Abraham of the suffering his descendants would undergo in Egypt. This verse thus explicitly demonstrates the fulfilment of that prophecy.

7. **v. 11 Pithom and Raamses.** In a later article I hope to make some brief comments about the geographical and historical setting of the Exodus, God willing. In passing, it is worth noting that we are given relatively little information to help us, at least as far as dating is concerned. Some very obvious details, such as the names of the Pharaohs in question, are not given. This I think is deliberate, and I will return to it in dealing with chapter 3.

8. **v. 14.** Notice the repetition of 'service' in this verse. It is stressed even more strongly in the Hebrew than in the AV, since the words variously translated 'bondage', 'serve' and 'service' are all forms of the Hebrew root *'abad*. Notice that there are *four* occurrences in this verse, and one in the preceding verse.